The New Criterion

November 2001

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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Published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019, a nonprofit public foundation as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public. ISSN 0734-0222. November 2001, Volume 20, Number 3. Subscriptions: $42 for one year, $78 for two. For Canada and Mexico, add $7 per year. Outside North America, add $14 per year. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster and subscribers: send change of address, all remittances, and subscription inquiries to The New Criterion, P.O. Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834. Copyright © 2001 by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc. Newsstand distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., One Media Way, 12406 Rt. 250, Milan, OH 44846. (800) 221-3148. Available in microfilm from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. All correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. (212) 247-6980. Notice of nonreceipt must be sent to the Office Manager within three months of the issue date. **Internet: http://www.newcriterion.com Email: letters@newcriterion.com**

Advertising: Fred Stern, 44 Paulin Boulevard, Leonia, NJ 07605. (201) 947-2674.
Subscriptions: To subscribe, renew, or report a problem please call (800) 783-4903.

The New Criterion is designed by Alvin and James Eisenman. It is set in 10-point Galliard and is printed by Science Press in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, USA.

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Notes & Comments: November 2001

A burst of clarity

Did the Swedish Academy have a fit of conscience? A sudden access of common sense? A literary metanoia? Whatever happened, we were both pleased and astonished at the news that this year's Nobel Prize in literature was to be awarded to the Trinidad-born British novelist V. S. Naipaul. We were pleased because there is no one now writing who is more deserving of the honor than Mr.—since 1989, Sir Vidia—Naipaul. His novels—we think particularly of *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), *Guerrillas* (1975), and *A Bend in the River* (1979)—are among the most penetrating, gracefully written, and psychologically subtle of our time. And his cultural reportage—especially *Among the Believers* (1981) and *Beyond Belief* (1998), his two books about Islamic fundamentalism—provides a courageous and devastatingly accurate look into the furnace of religious fanaticism. Naipaul's oeuvre makes important contributions both to contemporary literature and to our understanding of contemporary life. For many years, he has been an obvious candidate for this high honor.

Nevertheless, we were astonished to hear that Naipaul had won the Nobel Prize. His defense of civilized values—and his corresponding criticism of "Third Worldism" and Islamic fanaticism—has earned him the undying enmity of the politically correct literary establishment. It is said that he even had the distinction of attracting an informal coterie whose declared task it was to prevent him from winning the Nobel Prize. For many years his enemies prevailed. No group is more sensitive to the winds of political correctness these days than the eminences in Stockholm who dispense the Nobel laurels. Hence their eagerness to embrace third-rate novelists of victimhood (Toni Morrison), Fascists-turned-Communists-turned-anarchists (Dario Fo), out-and-out Stalinists (José Saramago), and reliable dispensers of left-wing, anti-American sentiment (Gunther Grass, Nadine Gordimer). How anomalous Naipaul seems in such company!

Whatever the reasons for the Nobel committee's burst of clarity, we can be grateful that it happened now, when the values that Naipaul champions are so conspicuously under attack. We have in these pages occasionally cited Naipaul's essay "Our Universal Civilization," which was first delivered in 1990 as the Wriston Lecture sponsored by the Manhattan Institute in New York. Naipaul describes there his literary development as a journey from the "periphery" to the "center": from his native Trinidad—the periphery of universal civilization—to London, its center. The autobiographical movement he traces is at the same time the long, sometimes difficult movement of Western civilization as a whole. It embodies, Naipaul writes, a capacious idea of human fulfillment.

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> It is an elastic idea; it fits all men. It implies a certain kind of society, a certain kind of awakened spirit. I don't imagine my father's Hindu parents would have been able to understand the idea. So much is contained in it: the idea of the individual, responsibility, choice, the life of the intellect, the idea of vocation and perfectibility and achievement. It is an immense human idea. It cannot be reduced to a fixed system. It cannot generate fanaticism. But it is known to exist, and because of that, other more rigid systems in the end blow away.

But not, we might add, without the brisk wind of moral self-assurance, a commodity that has until recently too often been lacking in Western democracies.

It was precisely for daring to extol Western civilization as something "universal," which "fits all men," that Naipaul has been so vehemently attacked by the left. Writing in 1998 about *Beyond Belief*, the radical-chic academic critic Edward Said assured readers that Naipaul's criticism of Islamic fundamentalism represented "an intellectual catastrophe of the first order": "so much is now lost on Naipaul," Said wrote. "His writing has become repetitive and uninteresting. His gifts have been squandered. He can no longer make sense."

In fact, in *Beyond Belief*, as elsewhere, Naipaul came bearing that most unwelcome instrument: a mirror in which were displayed the shattered illusions of fond hopes, the rancid pieties of baseless "ideals"—chief among which has been the multicultural ideal of the moral equality of all cultures. Naipaul ruthlessly exposed the mendacity of this dogma. "There probably has been no imperialism like that of Islam and the Arabs," Naipaul noted, because "Islam seeks as an article of faith to erase the past; the believers in the end honour Arabia alone; they have nothing to return to." As the journalist Tunku Varadarajan observed recently in a perceptive piece on Naipaul in *The Wall Street Journal*, "for telling this truth, Mr. Naipaul has been attacked in the Islamic world, as well as in the West by liberals who see no harm in projecting all societies as equal and as equally 'valid.'" Naipaul made sense, all right, but it was not the sort of sense that Edward Said and his intellectual confrères wanted to hear.

Absolute relativism

It has often been said that the first casualty of war is truth. That is generally taken to mean that in the course of prosecuting a war, governments will often subordinate truth to propaganda. That is true enough, a lamentable but perfectly understandable response to extremity. But America's new war against terrorism reminds us that there is another sense in which truth is a casualty of war. We refer to the surreal, truth-denying response of the academic left to the political and moral realities that have prompted the conflict.

In a much noted article that appeared on *The Wall Street Journal*'s website, the journalist Andrew Sullivan opined that

> one of the overlooked aspects of the war we are now fighting is the awakening it has spawned on the left. In one atrocity, Osama bin Laden may have accomplished what a generation of conservative writers have failed to do: convince mainstream liberals of the illogic and nihilism of the powerful postmodern left.

There is something in what Sullivan says. There has been at least a partial awakening among establishment liberals. Confronted with the horror of September 11, instinctively flaccid liberals—many of them, anyway—have found new resolution and toughness. The same cannot be said for the "postmodern left" itself. In those vertiginous precincts, "illogic and nihilism" have proved to be hardy perennials.

Mr. Sullivan cites several examples. As usual, Duke University's senior pomo Marxist Fredric Jameson provided a floridly inscrutable specimen. Writing in *The London Review of Books*, Jameson began by noting

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his reluctance "to comment on the recent 'events' because the event in question, as history, is incomplete and one can even say that it has not yet fully happened." How much absurdity is contained in the scare quotes around "events"?

Verbal efflorescences such as Jameson's occupy a special place in the Baedeker of contemporary intellectual pathology. To any healthy mind, it is immediately clear that something has gone disastrously wrong. More worrisome, because less obviously insane, are the sophistical speculations of Jameson's former colleague Stanley Fish. Fish is a clever man. Indeed, elsewhere in this issue the critic Paul Dean offers admiring, if qualified, praise for his recent work on John Milton. But at the center of that cleverness is an "illogic and nihilism" every bit as destructive as the more patently loopy variety dispensed by Jameson & Co. Fish is like the nineteenth-century confidence man Barney Barnato. "Gentlemen," he said, addressing a shareholders' meeting, "those are my principles, and if you don't like them– I've got others." A few years ago, when the physicist Alan Sokal gulled a trendy academic journal into publishing blatant nonsense, he successfully highlighted the intellectual bankruptcy of postmodernism to just about everyone—except Stanley Fish. Fish rushed into print in *The New York Times* to declare that "it is Alan Sokal, not his targets, who threatens to undermine" intellectual standards.

Fish was back in the *Times* on October 15 with "Condemnation Without Absolutes," the perfect postmodern response to attacks on postmodernism. Where V. S. Naipaul commended the West for its development of "universal civilization," Fish wants us dispense with universals altogether—what he calls "the empty rhetoric of universal absolutes." We shouldn't say that the terrorists are "irrational madmen," he cautions, because "irrational actors are by definition without rhyme or reason, and there's no point in reasoning about them on the way to fighting them." But the real difficulty, which Fish elides, is not reasoning *about* madmen but reasoning *with* them. He also tells us that it is "inaccurate and unhelpful" to say "we are at war against international terrorism." What, after all, is "terrorism"? Fish approvingly notes the Reuters news agency's decision not to use the word "terrorist" because, as its news director said, "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." A Reuters spokesman explained, "we're trying to treat everyone on a level playing field."

A "level playing field"? The best response to this nonsense was John O'Sullivan's in *National Review*. If the word "terrorist" is unacceptable, what alternatives are there? O'Sullivan suggested "mass murderers"–accurate enough, but, of course, unacceptable to moral equalizers at Reuters. "It is terrorists hijacking planes who put themselves on a different and lower level to other people," O'Sullivan noted. "When Reuters decided not to call the perpetrators of the World Trade Center attack 'terrorists,' it took a step towards making people feel less guilty about aiding or sympathizing with such evil."

For his part, Stanley Fish warns against invoking "absolutes" like "good" and "evil." "We have not seen the face of evil," he insists; "we have seen the face of an enemy who comes at us with a full roster of grievances, goals and strategies." This from a Milton scholar? Milton's Satan was full of plans, goals, and strategies. He was also evil incarnate. The only absolute Fish can bear is absolute relativism. He knows that "relativism" has an unwelcome ring to many ears. So he fudges the issue by describing "relativism" as "the practice of putting yourself in your adversary's shoes, not in order to wear them as your own but in order to have some understanding (far short of approval) of why someone else might want to wear them." Relativism in this sense, he says, "is simply another name for serious thought." In fact, it is another name for sophistry. The serious, thoughtful person does not respond to terrorism by trying to understand it. He responds by attempting to destroy it.

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The survival of culture: III

The felicific calculus of modern medicine

by Anthony Daniels

In May of this year, one of Britain's most wanted criminals, a man called Ronald Biggs, returned to Britain after thirty years of exile in Brazil. Now aged seventy-one, he was arrested on arrival and taken straight to prison. Biggs was one of the men behind the "Great Train Robbery" of 1963, whose daring astonished the country and netted the robbers about $60 million in today's money. Biggs was caught and imprisoned, but he managed to escape to Brazil, a country with which Britain does not have an extradition treaty. He decided to return after so long a period of exile because he was ill and impoverished (he had lived for years by granting interviews to British publications). He appeared to have calculated that the medical treatment in a British prison would be superior to that given to an indigent person of foreign extraction in Brazil.

On the day of his arrival back in Britain, a newspaper known nationally for the robustness of its views asked me whether I was prepared, as a doctor who worked part-time in a prison, to write an article to suggest that Biggs should be denied medical treatment while he was a prisoner. After all, he was a professional thief who had evaded, defied, and humiliated the British criminal justice system for many years; he had contributed no taxes to the exchequer, far from it, and now that he had returned home his incarceration would cost the British taxpayer a veritable mint of money. Plainly, he was not a deserving case.

I turned down the commission and promptly wrote an article in another newspaper of not dissimilar political bent to explain why Biggs should receive his treatment like any other patient. No doctor to whom he appealed for help could possibly say to him, "You are Ronald Biggs, you robbed a train and evaded justice for more than thirty years, and therefore I refuse to treat you." Indeed, it was the very unworthiness of the man that illustrated the strength of the medical profession's ethical commitment to treat individual patients irrespective of their moral qualities. A good man does not receive better treatment from his doctor than a bad one: at least, insofar as it is possible for the doctor, himself a human being when all is said and done, to divorce his actions from his feelings.

This restatement of an elementary principle of Hippocratic medical ethics called forth many vituperative letters from outraged readers. They said that if they were doctors, they would have no difficulty at all in letting Biggs die. On the contrary, they would do everything in their power to bring forward his well-merited demise. Hippocrates was a fool and a hypocrite: anyway, he had never existed. I suspect that if there had been a plebiscite at the time as to whether or not Biggs should be given medical treatment, a resounding majority would have voted for withholding it, if not for outright euthanasia. This demonstrates that the Hippocratic ethic, like every other

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civilized cultural achievement, is not to be taken for granted; it has to be protected and defended, sometimes from majority opinion. Barbarism is a permanent temptation.

But there are threats to the Hippocratic ethical tradition that are far more serious and insidious than the gusts of anger that periodically sweep through the public like wind through a cornfield, leaving equally little trace because the memory of modern man is no longer than his attention span. Doctors have been expelled from the Hippocratic Garden of Eden (if they ever truly inhabited it) because they—and others—have eaten of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.

In the Hippocratic tradition, the doctor is the agent of the patient and of no one else. When a patient perceives he has an ailment, he visits the doctor. The benevolent doctor listens to the patient, examines him, and proposes a cure, if there is one to be had. The patient, grateful for the doctor's disinterested advice, pays him an appropriate fee for his trouble. The whole transaction is intensely simple and private: no one else need know anything about it. There are no ethical complications.

It requires very little knowledge of the conditions in which medicine is practiced nowadays to understand that medical ethics have become considerably more complex —that is to say, tense and controversial— than they were in the days of Hippocrates. To begin with, there are few Hippocratic patients any longer, those who are content to entrust or submit themselves to the wisdom and judgment of others: modern man finds that to do so in any circumstances whatever is an affront to his dignity, autonomy, individuality, and self-importance. Armed with a sheaf of raw information (and misinformation) downloaded from the internet, and unaware that right judgment is anything more than a matter of applying a simple algorithm to such information, the patient increasingly feels himself, rather than the doctor, to be the authority.

This is a minor problem, however, compared to that of third-party interference in the relationship between doctor and patient. The simple Hippocratic model assumes that the patient will reward the doctor directly from his own pocket, not from that of a vast and anonymous bureaucratic organization, which is driven by the need to make a profit or to contain costs, or both.

The Hippocratic ethic, like every other civilized cultural achievement, is not to be taken for granted; it has to be protected and defended, sometimes from majority opinion. Barbarism is a permanent temptation.

But it is a long time since so idyllically simple a relationship has existed between doctor and patient—at least, in the vast majority of cases.

Medicine long ago passed the stage at which the doctor performed an examination that cost nothing except the value he attached to his time, and then prescribed a regimen or a few simple unguents or chemical remedies well within the financial capacity of his patient to buy. Medical investigations, procedures, and treatments have become so technologically sophisticated and expensive that for the great majority of mankind they are available only by means of insurance. Only the very rich and the very poor (who, in rich countries, are able to rely on public charity) can afford not to insure themselves against future medical expenses.

It is hardly surprising under the circumstances that the Hippocratic ethical injunctions—for example, that the doctor should never knowingly kill his patient—have been superseded in practical importance by the more pressing ethical principle that he who pays the piper calls the tune. And this is so

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regardless of whether the third party that pays the piper is an insurance company (as in America) or the state (as in Britain). The complaints of British and American doctors about the erosion of their independence by outside interference are remarkably similar despite the very different systems of medical insurance under which they practice. This fact should lay to rest the widespread notion that the American medical profession has brought its troubles on itself by overcharging and greed: for precisely the same dissatisfactions are voiced by the British medical profession, whose ability to express its greed in practical action has been severely limited by the virtual nationalization of medical practice in 1948, which turned most doctors into salaried workers.

For a time, the third-party insurers who paid for the medical treatment of patients were content to leave the medical profession to its own devices. They did not exercise their implicit power, leaving doctors to inhabit something of a fool's paradise. But as the escalating costs of technologically advanced medicine combined with ever greater levels of public scrutiny of all aspects of human existence outsiders to the profession came to feel they had not only the right but also the duty to come between the doctor and his patient.

Since costs were so high, it was obvious to those who administered the funds that paid for medical treatment (which ultimately derived, of course, from the patients and potential patients themselves, a fact that administrators everywhere were apt conveniently to forget) that value for money should be sought. If demand was infinite but supply was limited, some pretty elaborate calculations would have to be done to ensure that money was not wasted and that the maximum good was procured per dollar expended. A brand of utilitarianism descended over medical practice: not the greatest good for the individual patient, which had been the doctor's traditional aim, but the greatest good for the greatest number. Unfortunately, doctors (with the exception of the very few among them who were epidemiologists) were by temperament, training, and tradition limited to the individual patients who consulted them; therefore they were ill-placed to decide how to bring about the utilitarian heaven in which every cent counted and not a one was wasted. Others than they would have to stand *in loco parentis* for the patients and their insurance premiums.

There have been a few practical problems with this medical felicific calculus, but these have not been regarded as at least theoretically insuperable by those who would constrain the independence of the medical profession. How, for example, do you compare the benefit produced by a liver transplant or a hip replacement with that of treating adolescent acne? (Let us leave aside for the moment the vulgar, pragmatic question of whether you can instantaneously turn a dermatologist into an orthopedic or transplant surgeon, or vice versa, were such a change of medical priorities found to be desirable.) For any such calculus to work, it is clear that commensurable units of medical benefit be found, a kind of euro of medicine, and, since whatever is necessary must be possible (for how could anything that was impossible be necessary?), it follows that such a unit is awaiting discovery. Indeed, some have claimed to have found it already, in such measures as the QALY, the Quality Adjusted Life Year: though, as with the euro, skeptics remain. But what is clear is that, in the search for the universal measure of health benefit, such disciplines as physiology, molecular biology, and pathology can no longer claim to be the queens of the medical sciences: the throne has been well and truly usurped by health economics.

The effects of this usurpation are likely to prove unfortunate. I give as a small example an instance from the experience of my wife, also a doctor, who practices entirely among the elderly. She sees a lot of patients with Alzheimer's disease, and recently drugs have been discovered that, at least for some patients, produce slight improvement in cog-

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nitive function or delay somewhat the progression of the disease.

These drugs are, however, relatively expensive: a year's supply costs in the region of $1500–$1800. The Director of Public Health for her area has advised that doctors refrain from prescribing these drugs on the grounds that, in times of financial stringency such as ours (and, personally, I have never lived in times other than those of financial stringency), the money could be better spent elsewhere: that is to say, could produce more benefit per dollar expended. From the Director of Public Health's point of view, the question is all the more urgent because the population is aging, and therefore there will be ever more patients with Alzheimer's disease for whom these expensive drugs might be prescribed. He has accordingly asked that the doctors in his area who persist in prescribing the new drugs be reported to him by dispensing pharmacists. Although as yet he and his type have no legal powers to enforce their recommendations, an atmosphere of intimidation, coercion, and threat has been successfully created as a first step in depriving doctors of choice on behalf of their patients, and there is no intrinsic reason why the recommendations of medical bureaucrats should not eventually be granted the force of law. Regulation of this kind is admittedly easier to implement in state-dominated systems of health care such as Britain's, but less formal, monolithic, and draconian controls can nevertheless be implemented without much difficulty by third parties such as insurance companies. The underlying logic is the same.

My wife, however, has not accepted the medical bureaucrat's fiat. She still believes that, state employee or not, her duty is to her individual patient and not to the general good as interpreted by a civil servant. Indeed, she could not possibly have justified failing to prescribe to a patient drugs that she believed to be potentially beneficial by claiming that she was only obeying orders: that *excuse* has been unacceptable for a number of years, thanks to certain well-known events. On the contrary, she threatened to report the Director of Public Health to the medical licensing authorities, for his gross professional misconduct in recommending that doctors do other than their best for their individual patients: a violation of a fundamental principle of medical ethics to which, even in this weak piping time of cost-benefit analysis, we still pay lip service.

It is hardly surprising under the circumstances that the Hippocratic ethical injunctions —for example, that the doctor should never knowingly kill his patient—have been superseded in practical importance by the more pressing ethical principle that he who pays the piper calls the tune.

The situation was rendered all the more fraught by the publicity the new drugs had received, so that many of her patients (or rather, their relatives) had heard of them, and by the fact that, in all the areas surrounding hers, the Directors of Public Health, armed with precisely the same data about the drugs as the Director of Public Health from her area, had come to the opposite, but equally rational (or irrational), conclusion, namely that in their areas, the drugs should be prescribed for people with Alzheimer's disease.

A patient and his relatives are, naturally enough, concerned for the welfare of only one person at a time: namely that of the patient himself. The general good is of no interest to them, and they are unlikely to wish to forgo beneficial treatment of the patient merely because a medical bureaucrat, on the basis of some very dubious calculations indeed, has concluded that more people would benefit if the money were

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spent otherwise. No one loves humanity so much that he will voluntarily suffer a treatable condition.

Thus "rational" cost-benefit analysis promotes bitterness and social conflict. Not only are its calculations highly contentious—it is not uncommon, for example, to see the figure attached to the economic burden of a given disease vary by one or even two orders of magnitude—but, unless they result in the same policy being implemented worldwide, they will also fuel resentment. Man is a comparing animal, never more so than in an information age, and the inhabitants of country X who suffer from an illness will soon enough learn that their counterparts in country Y receive better treatment than they. There are no longer any carpets under which disagreeable information can be swept.

Needless to say, it is possible to reduce any argument whatsoever, including that against cost-benefit analysis, to absurdity. If, for example, there were a treatment that cost $1 million per patient to extend life by one minute, the gain would clearly not be worth the expenditure, but this conclusion, though it relies upon the reasoning of cost-benefit analysis, is obviously arrived at *grosso modo*: no elaborate (and therefore untrustworthy) calculations are necessary to reach it.

There are pressures upon the doctor, however, other than the merely financial, to treat his patient less as an individual in need of succor than was ever envisaged by the Hippocratic ideal: pressures that come from within medical science itself. Explicit statistical calculation has now entered medical practice so thoroughly that it cannot be removed—nor ought it be. A very large proportion of the work of a modern doctor inevitably concerns the treatment of not a person but a statistic. I can illustrate the difference between Hippocratic medicine and modern medicine by considering the treatment of two conditions: hypothyroidism and hypertension. The first can be treated according to the Hippocratic tradition, the second not.

A patient with hypothyroidism visits his doctor with symptoms that the doctor attributes to an insufficiency of thyroid hormone, which he then prescribes. If he gets the dose right (and it is easy enough to do so), he can be confident that his patient will return completely to good health. The doctor has treated his patient as an individual.

High blood pressure, by contrast, is a symptomless disease (except in its last stages). It is likely to be diagnosed as a chance finding during a visit to the doctor for other reasons. The decision to treat the symptomless disease is based upon the knowledge that people with high blood pressure are at increased risk of a premature heart attack or stroke. The risk is reduced if the blood pressure is lowered by the use of drugs. For an elderly patient with, shall we say, moderately raised blood pressure, it is more likely than not that he will fail to suffer the premature heart attack or stroke whose prevention is the object of treatment. Moreover, it is more likely than not that, if treated, the reduction in his blood pressure will fail to effect the desired end result, that is to say, the non-occurrence of either of these serious medical conditions. The doctor would have to treat about one-hundred patients with moderately raised blood pressure for five years in order to prevent one stroke or heart attack.

Nor is this all: the drugs that the doctor prescribes to reduce his patients' blood pressure have unwanted side effects, in some if not all cases. A symptomless disease is transformed by the doctor's attention and by his resort to statistical reasoning into one with symptoms, albeit those caused by his treatment rather than by the disease per se. Where now is the most famous of all Hippocratic injunctions, first to do no harm?

In his defence, the doctor can say that one stroke avoided is worth more than the relatively mild side effects experienced by, say, fifty other patients. But the difficulty of the situation is compounded by the impossibility of knowing which patient it is whose life will be, or perhaps has already been, preserved from a stroke or heart attack. The

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person who benefits might or might not be one of those who suffer from the side effects. No one can possibly know. What is clear is that the doctor can only justify his treatment of high blood pressure if he resorts to a utilitarian argument: that the sum of the good he does outweighs the harm, and not to any given individual, but to a class of individuals, namely those with high blood pressure.

Leaving aside the question of whether it is in principle knowable how many side effects suffered are equal in the felicific calculus to one stroke avoided, it is clear that the doctor is departing from his commitment to individuals when he treats a patient with hypertension: for in any individual case, he has a much greater chance of doing harm (even if of a relatively trivial kind) than of doing good (even if of a significant and life-saving kind). In fact, much of what the modern doctor does, including routine screening for cancer and other serious diseases, is inevitably based upon the same utilitarian logic. And whatever objections might be raised against utilitarianism as an abstract moral theory (and there are many such), it would be a strange modern doctor who never, under any circumstances, used utilitarian thought to guide his conduct.

The treatment of hypertension is a good lens through which to view the sacred cow of modern medical ethics: patient autonomy. I asked a friend of mine, a clinical pharmacologist of distinction, for his estimate of the number of patients treated for high blood pressure who were aware of the logic upon which such treatment was based.

> "Two," he answered with characteristic decisiveness.
>
> "You mean 2 percent, or two in a thousand?," I asked.
>
> "No," he replied. "I mean two in the whole of Great Britain."

In other words, he thought there were scores and possibly hundreds of thousands of people who took tablets each day for their blood pressure who had only the haziest understanding of why they were doing so. By coincidence, I was consulted shortly afterwards by a man of about average intelligence who had high blood pressure, who had stopped taking his pills for lack of a repeat prescription, and who asked whether I would renew it. I asked him why he had taken the pills in the first place. "Because," he replied, "my doctor told me to." I then asked him why he thought his doctor had told him to. "Because he thought they would do me good." I explained, as clearly as I could, the logic of antihypertensive treatment. His eyes glazed over as if what I said had nothing to do with him, as if I were the village pedant. At the end of my explanation, I asked him whether he had understood what I told him, and he replied that he had.

> "So what do you want?," I asked.
>
> "I'll do whatever you think is best, doctor."

He was an old-fashioned patient, who didn't want autonomy; he wanted to be told what to do, as I have wanted to be told what to do on the few occasions in my life when, though a doctor, I have been seriously ill. The last thing I wanted when I was near death's door was to make a consumer choice, informed or otherwise. I do not think that he and I are the only people in the world who have sometimes wanted others to decide things for us.

To be sure, my patient's abrogation of his autonomy was itself a decision taken autonomously, just as the man who sells himself into slavery acts freely. To have demanded, therefore, that he choose for himself whether or not to take the pills would have constituted a denial of his autonomy. It remained for me to act in his best interests, but how was I to decide what were his best interests in a situation like this, independent of the wishes he either could not or would not express? It is easy enough to decide when a patient arrives unconscious at an hospital in diabetic ketoacidosis; it is vastly more difficult when the chances of doing

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slight harm are very much greater than those of doing considerable good.

In the event, I decided—as most doctors would—to obey that most glorious of all modern medical ethical imperatives, the need to avoid litigation, and prescribed the medication for him. (It sometimes seems that patients consult doctors not so much in the hope of a cure, but in the hope of a cause, or pretext, for litigation: for even settlements out of court, without admission of liability, produce sums of money for the litigant that he is unlikely to accumulate in any other way.) The courts, in assessing negligence, are apt to take as their standard what most doctors would do in the circumstances, and what most doctors would do in the circumstances is usually determined by what the most gung-ho and activist of expert witnesses would do. There is thus an inherent bias against what, in the days of therapeutic nihilism, used to be called "masterly inactivity." In these circumstances, the doctor is not treating his patient; he is treating his own anxiety.

But there is another direction from which traditional medical ethics is under attack. Willing as many patients still are to surrender their autonomy to doctors, many others—an increasing proportion—demand the complete sovereignty over their own body. The doctor thus becomes a mere technician whose job is to satisfy the whims of his client (a patient no longer).

Recently in Britain, a surgeon caused a stir by amputating the perfectly healthy leg of a patient who claimed that, ever since adulthood, he was convinced that nature had made a dreadful mistake in supplying him with two lower limbs and that he could not be happy unless the appendage surplus to his requirements were removed. The surgeon justified the operation by saying that, in satisfying his patient's desire, he was improving the quality of his life. He was also reducing the risk of a dangerous, botched auto-amputation. And since the operation was performed under Britain's National Health Service, the surgeon was also able truly to claim that he had no pecuniary interest in the operation, and, living as we do in a highly materialistic age, a lack of pecuniary interest in an action almost automatically justifies it from the moral point of view in the eyes of a population rendered cynical by universal greed.

The surgeon's approach, to satisfy the autonomous desire of his patient whatever his desire might be, leaves doctors permanently open to blackmail. A person has only to say to a doctor that his life is miserable without drug or operation X and threaten either to procure it for himself by illicit or dangerous means or to commit suicide for the doctor to feel obliged to comply with

The unwillingness of modern man to place limitations upon his own appetites—the natural consequence of a pagan worship of the right to choice in everything—is seen around us every day.

the demand. Oddly enough, an emphasis on personal autonomy goes *pari passu* with the demand that doctors should bring about harm reduction: individuals being autonomous only as far as the satisfaction of their desires is concerned, not for the ill consequences of the satisfaction of their desires, the responsibility for the diminishment of which they are only too happy to delegate to doctors and other authorities.

It would not have surprised Edmund Burke to learn that the surgeon who amputated his client's leg was soon inundated by people requesting the same operation. There is nothing quite like the prospect of satisfaction to provoke bizarre desire; and, as if patriotically to preserve her nation's reputation for rococo excess, an American woman flew to Britain in the hope of having both her legs amputated—by a trained and competent surgeon, of course. The public revelation that there exists a

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sexual underworld, complete with its own websites, of people who are erotically excited only by amputees, put a temporary stop to the amputations, but surely only a temporary one, until a court somewhere in the world rules that it is man's inalienable right to have bits lopped off him if he so wishes.

It is the combination of technical advance, the concept of man the sovereign consumer (whose life consists, or should consist, of nothing but the endless extension of choice), and the doctrine of universal equity and human rights that produces so many of the ethical dilemmas that have given rise to a new profession: the medical ethicist. The idea that extension of choice is invariably a good (indeed, is the whole and sole purpose of life) is now deeply entrenched the world over. The triumph of the American Declaration of Independence has been complete: if every man has the right to pursue his happiness, and his happiness entails the amputation of his leg, it follows (does it not?) that he has a right to pursue and eventually to have such an amputation. No possibilities should therefore be ruled out a priori, certainly not on the grounds that they are unseemly, disgusting, or sacrilegious: for to do so is to impose standards that are not provable or universal, and therefore constitutes an abridgement of freedom.

Consumer choice has become itself the beginning and end of wisdom. In a recent autobiographical book, one of the scientists principally responsible for the development of the contraceptive pill, Carl Djerassi, had this to say: since sexual behavior and attitudes are such personal matters, and at the same time so much a part of each culture's identity, differences should be accommodated rather than fought. Only a contraceptive supermarket—a multiplicity of choices to fit the peculiar software aspects of a given society—will provide such accommodation. In other words, the only way to preserve diversity is to turn the whole world into an existential Wal-Mart.

The unwillingness of modern man to place limitations upon his own appetites—the natural consequence of a pagan worship of the right to choice in everything—is seen around us every day. Shortly before I wrote this, *The Guardian* newspaper reported that a British judge had ordered DNA tests on the five men with whom a woman had slept in four days, with a view to finding out (for purely financial reasons) who was the father of her child. Apparently, she had been so desperate to have a child that she had slept with as many men as she could find during her fertile period, in the hope that at least one of them was himself fertile.

The egotistical shallowness of such behavior beggars description, let alone comment, but it is now undoubtedly a mass phenomenon. The woman had taken her right to a child—that is to say, the absence of any legal authority with the right or duty to prevent her from having a child—to mean that she had a positive right to one, regardless of circumstances. Her right soon transmuted itself into a desire, as such imagined rights so often do, until it became the existential itch that she had to scratch. All other considerations, such as the welfare of her future child, or a regard for the decent opinion of mankind, counted for nothing: she was but an atom in a social vacuum, the Brownian motion of her whims being for her the measure of all things.

We live, moreover, in an age of equity and equality (the two are usually equated). If one person in the world is entitled to something, then it follows that everyone else in the world must be entitled to it also. Thus, if a woman in her sixties in Italy is helped by in vitro fertilization and hormonal manipulation to have a baby, it follows that every other woman in the world who so desires it must have a right to similar treatment: for otherwise an injustice will have been done. This is the way that desires previously unheard or undreamt of enter the mind and there fester.

There is, as the Marxists used to say, a dialectical relationship between technical

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possibility and the whimsicality of man. It so happened that unprecedented progress in molecular biology, which now opens up Promethean possibilities previously unsuspected, occurred just after the rise of mass self-importance as a cultural phenomenon. The prospect of increasing control over some of the most elemental aspects of human existence has made us less tolerant than ever before of its inherent limitations. There are many things fundamental to our lives that we would once have accepted as being beyond our control that we no longer accept as such, and appear to us to have become a matter of choice.

To be sure, Prometheanism has a long and distinguished history, and has done much good. Let me take a single example, by no means the most important: osteoarthritis. It used to be accepted (because it had to be) that old people's joints became stiff to the point of immobility. A British surgeon with a background in engineering, John Charnley, had the idea of implanting artificial ball-and-socket joints in the hips of people crippled by osteoarthritis, since which time joint surgery has progressed almost exponentially. It is difficult to see in this anything but unadulterated good: much suffering has been relieved and many lives enriched by it. But such advances are not of deep or philosophical significance. They do not affect the human personality in any fundamental way. And they are wholly to be welcomed. Suffering might be good for the human soul (and in any case is unavoidable), but so is the search for the relief of suffering.

Increasingly, however, medical procedures are not so much directed at relieving suffering as at fulfilling desire. Of course, the distinction is not entirely watertight, for the thwarting of desire can itself (especially when it is believed that relief is possible) lead to suffering. That is why a dictum enunciated by an old acquaintance of mine, Dr. Colin Brewer, contains more than a grain of truth: misery increases to meet the means available for its alleviation. The plastic surgeon who carries out a rhinoplasty might be relieving the most terrible social phobia that renders life intolerable, or pandering to the mere vanity of his patient, or anything on the continuum between the two. Modern plastic surgery started as an attempt to repair the terribly disfigured faces of airmen during the war who were burned when their aircraft crashed, work that was both infinitely painstaking and noble, but it soon took up the search for the eternal youth to which some of the rich believed their money entitled them.

There is, as the Marxists used to say, a dialectical relationship between technical possibility and the whimsicality of man. It so happened that unprecedented progress in molecular biology, which now opens up Promethean possibilities previously unsuspected, occurred just after the rise of mass self-importance as a cultural phenomenon.

Though the distinction is not clear-cut, there is a difference between what is done to relieve suffering and what is done to satisfy desire. A hip replacement is different from a sex change, a bowel resection from a facelift. The startling advances in molecular biology (as yet little translated into clinical practice) are set to bring about both the relief of suffering and the satisfaction of desire. Not only might the advances lead to a form of negative eugenics—the "culling" of undesirable embryos before they are born—but also to a form of positive genetics as well. Children might one day be born to specification, as cars are ordered with or without their various extras. We will no longer accept that life is, to some extent, a

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lottery: we will demand control over everything. The fact that the satisfaction of such a demand will always be illusory, will always shimmer like a mirage beyond the next technical advance, will be likely to make us bitter rather than happy. Certainly, it will inflate our sense of our own importance.

A recent case exemplifies the coarsening effect upon human sensibility (of patient and doctor alike) that technical possibility can exert, when it accompanies the radical individualism of which the libertarian right and the subversive left both approve. A British woman agreed, via the internet, to act (for a fee of $19,000) as the surrogate mother for a Californian couple. The Californian woman was infertile, and so a donor's ovum was fertilized in vitro by her consort's sperm. The resultant embryo was implanted into the British woman's uterus.

The agreement between the couple and the surrogate mother was that, if the pregnancy should turn out to be multiple, as is commonly the case with IVF, it should be "reduced" by selective abortion. (The use of the euphemistic term "reduce" in these circumstances surely points to a guilty conscience, an implicit acknowledgment that an abortion is not an operation like any other.) The selective abortion was to take place, however, only if it were demanded before the twelfth week of gestation.

In the event, it was a twin pregnancy, but the Californian couple did not request a "reduction" until the thirteenth week. At this point, the surrogate mother turned tender towards the contents of her womb: for after twelve weeks, there was a risk that an attempt at selective abortion would result in a total, that is to say, a double, abortion. While she regarded it as perfectly ethical to kill one fetus, she jibbed at killing both: to do so would have been beyond the moral pale.

The Californian couple, however, had ordered one child, not two. As consumers, why should they now be forced to accept what they had not wanted, indeed what they had specifically stated that they did not want? They therefore abrogated the agreement unilaterally, claiming that the surrogate mother had not kept her side of the bargain, leaving her holding the babies, as it were, that she had never wanted for herself either (she was already, it goes without saying, a single mother).

What could any decent surrogate mother do in such circumstances but sue for breach of contract and punitive damages? There was in any case a rumor to the effect that the Californian couple had grown less keen on the whole surrogate-motherhood arrangement since discovering that the donor of the ovum suffered from an eating disorder—either anorexia or bulimia—and, fearing that the condition was wholly or partially genetic, and not wishing ever to be faced with the prospect of a fasting or vomiting teenager, they found a pretext for escaping from the contract. A legal battle ensued: for it is an ill wind that blows no lawyer any good.

The moral (or perhaps one should call it the immoral) of the story hardly needs pointing out. What is clear, however, is that the medical profession not only made the squalid situation possible, but also actively cooperated in its production. At no point did any doctor have the courage to resist the egotistical wishes of the three people involved. They prostituted themselves to the whims of this trio.

What, then, is the future of the traditional practice of medicine: that is to say, of the relief of individual suffering brought about by discernable pathology? The value of that tradition has been brought into question by the barbarians within the gates—by the kind of academics and intellectuals who believe that the whole purpose of the human intellect is to mock and devalue what all previous intellect has wrought. Thus the history of medicine is now taught not as that of the arduous, difficult, painful, and contorted path of man from ignorance to knowledge, from suffering to the relief of suffering; it is taught as that of the search for power and prestige by a group of grasping, elitist, exploitative, and comically ig-

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norant men. The fact that countless thousands of them struggled in vain, as best they could, to unlock nature's secrets, or that the efforts of such giants as Vesalius or Harvey did not bear practical fruit for hundreds of years, is not taken as a sign of the nobility and faith of the enterprise, but of its misguidedness, foolishness, or unimportance. From the security of our modern comfort, in the knowledge that many of our illnesses can be cured and most can be alleviated, the efforts of the past are denigrated or ridiculed, reduced in scale, denied their worth, and so forth, using all the instruments of an exaggerated scepticism whose object is not to find truth but to destroy traditions, customs, institutions, and confidence in the worth of civilization itself.

One of the products of our civilization is, of course, the vast intellectual edifice upon which medicine has been built. The plain fact is that the Western medical tradition is incomparably greater in achievement than that of the rest of mankind put together and quintupled. This is a thought too horrible for our academics and intellectuals to contemplate, especially as their own contributions to the welfare of mankind are usually exiguous, to put it generously. Destruction is the best they can manage, and so, with the full force of their insincerity, they turn their rhetorico-critical faculties on the achievements that have made their lives of ease possible.

It is important, however, not to be apocalyptic when no apocalypse is at hand (though the opposite error is even more dangerous). As my polymath friend Raymond Tallis repeatedly points out, one of the errors bedeviling the reporting of medicine in the press is the use of numerators without denominators: one wouldn't want to ruin a good story by putting it in some kind of perspective. For example, a surgeon in Britain recently removed the wrong kidney from a patient, and there was something of an outcry against the incompetence of surgeons. Such gross errors should, in the abstract, never happen, but, as Hippocrates said, art is long, life is short, and the occasion fleeting. Man is not a failsafe mechanism. In all the ensuing outcry, not a single newspaper thought it necessary to investigate how many kidneys had been correctly removed by surgeons for each one removed incorrectly: about 25,000. Personally, I doubt whether only one in 25,000 statements made by journalists is in error.

So it is necessary to put the threats to the traditional medical relationship (in its ideal form) into some kind of perspective. Again, Professor Tallis might be of help here. He analyzed the one-thousand complaints received in a year from patients at a large teaching hospital. One-thousand sounds like a horribly large figure, but only one-hundred complaints related to the clinical care the complainants had received, the rest being concerned about incidentals, such as bad food or the rudeness of porters, etc. Professor Tallis estimated, conservatively, that there had been 5.89 million interactions between clinical staff and patients in the same period: which means that there had been one complaint for every fifty-thousand clinical interactions. This is prima facie evidence of a high general level of satisfaction.

Satisfaction and satisfactoriness are not quite the same thing, of course. People can complain too much or they can complain too little. But the fact is that, despite the threats from financial pressure, epidemiological modes of thought, and technical advances that dissolve the distinctions between the permissible and the impermissible, the traditional medical relationship between doctor and patient lives on.

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Charles Péguy
by Roger Kimball

A great philosophy is not that which passes final judgments, which takes a seat in final truth. It is that which introduces uneasiness, which opens the door to commotion.
—Charles Péguy, "Note on M. Bergson"

Truth's pedagogue, braving an entrenched class
of fools and scoundrels, children of the world,
his eyes caged and hostile behind glass—still
Péguy said that Hope is a little child.
—Geoffrey Hill, *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*

In the introduction to his *Essays on European Literature* (1950), E. R. Curtius remarked on his good fortune in having been a contemporary and an interpreter of "men like Gide, Claudel, Péguy, Proust, Valéry, Hofmannsthal, Ortega, Joyce, Eliot." Greatness calls forth greatness, so it is easy to understand Curtius's gratitude. But what about his list? Joyce and Eliot are self-explanatory. Likewise Proust and Valéry, Ortega and Hofmannsthal. Gide and Claudel are at least plausible, even if their reputations have declined in the years since Curtius wrote. But Péguy? How did that unfamiliar name find its way onto the distinguished critic's "A-list"?

In the English-speaking world, the French poet and intermittently Catholic polemicist Charles Péguy is barely even a name today. Until recently, I knew him only as the author of the penetrating observation (found in a 1905 essay called "Notre Patrie") that "It will never be known what acts of cowardice have been motivated by the fear of not looking sufficiently progressive." Having gained in pertinence for nearly a century, that remark by itself is worth a modest sort of literary immortality.

From about 1910 until around the time Curtius composed his tabulary homage, Péguy was regularly invoked as a modern master—a peculiar master, to be sure, but a master nonetheless. Writing in *The New Statesman* in 1916, two years after Péguy's death in action at the beginning of World War I, T. S. Eliot commended him as "one of the most illustrious of the dead who have fallen in this war," "a national, a symbolic figure, the incarnation of the rejuvenated French spirit." The philosopher Henri Bergson, whom Péguy knew and whose work he wrote about, said that "he knew my most secret thought, such as I have never expressed it, such as I would have wished to express it." Similar encomia abound.

In our own day, enthusiasts for Péguy's work are much rarer. One of them is the French philosopher Pierre Manent. In "Charles Péguy: Between Political Faith and Faith" (1984), Manent extolled Péguy as "one of the most penetrating critics of the historical and sociological points of view which dominate modern consciousness." High praise. Manent acknowledges the "violently personal" character of Péguy's work, his habit of lacing considered arguments with *ad hominem* attacks, of ending lyrical

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expostulations with "an insult." But Manent discerned a "luminous mind, eager to understand and to think," behind the self-obsession and often bitter polemics. Péguy, Manent argues, continues to be "of capital importance," above all because of his insights into the distinctive hubris of modernity: the curious modern tendency to substitute faith in technique for the cultivation of wisdom, the belief that a perfect administration of life could somehow relieve the burden, the unpredictable adventure, of living.

Another of Péguy's recent admirers is the British poet Geoffrey Hill. Hill not only devoted a long poem to Péguy in 1984—*The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* evokes the title of Péguy's most famous poem *Le Mystère de la Charité de Jeanne d'Arc* (1909)—but also wrote an enthusiastic appreciation of Péguy, whom he clearly regards as a kindred spirit. Péguy was, Hill admitted, a man of violent emotions ("violent" and "passionate" are words that inevitably turn up whenever Péguy is on the menu), but also "a man of the most exact and exacting probity," "one of the great souls, one of the great prophetic intelligences, of our century." Reflecting on Péguy's return to an unorthodox Catholicism after a period of loudly declared atheism, Hill speaks of Péguy's having "rediscovered the solitary ardors of faith but not the consolations of religious practice. He remained self-excommunicate but adoring." Students of Hill's poetry will recognize the terrain.

I would not myself place Péguy in the exalted company of Proust, Eliot, and Co. His genius was too idiosyncratic, his achievement too diffuse. Even Péguy's admirers—most of them, anyway—acknowledge this. Eliot, for one, stressed Péguy's genuineness and lack of "affectation"; he also noted that "one would hardly call him a 'thinker.'" Péguy's style, Eliot said, "is not a style to think in; it is too emphatic, too insistent." In 1928, writing about Péguy's friend Julien Benda, Eliot noted in passing that Péguy was "a remarkable example of a writer who managed to influence many people, largely because he had so confused a mind that there was room for everything in it somehow." One misunderstands Eliot, I believe, if one misses the element of admiration in that deflationary remark. Order is admirable—Eliot wouldn't want us to do without that—but capaciousness, too, he suggests, is an intellectual strength.

In any event, if Péguy has occasionally been rated rather too highly, he is unduly neglected today. One reason for this is the character of Péguy's work. His combination of spiritual earnestness and rhetorical ferocity is currently out of fashion. There is also the pedestrian fact that so little of Péguy's work is readily available in English. Translations of a good deal of his poetry were made in the 1940s. And in 1943 a miscellany of prose snippets and poems was published under the title *Basic Verities*. That volume went through several printings but has long been out of print.

It is welcome news, then, that Liberty Fund has undertaken republication of *Temporal and Eternal*,[1] an "adaptation" of two long essays by Péguy that were first published in English in 1958. The book, with a new foreword by Pierre Manent, contains abbreviated and edited versions of *Notre Jeunesse*, Péguy's 1910 meditation on the Dreyfus Affair, and "Clio I," a posthumously published reflection on history, the clergy, and the modern world. *Notre Jeunesse* (translated as "Memories of Youth") is generally regarded as one of Péguy's most important essays. "Clio I," although it develops some themes introduced in *Notre Jeunesse*, is also (as Péguy's translator comments) "among the most turgid of his works."

In some respects, Péguy was very much a period piece. Immersed in the controversies, prejudices, and emotional weather of his day, he took on their coloring. This boosted his contemporary relevance. It also assured that he would soon seem dated. In

1 *Temporal and Eternal* by Charles Péguy, translated by Alexander Dru, foreword by Pierre Manent; Liberty Fund, 166 pages, $10 paper.

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intellectual matters as in hemlines, nothing seems more out-of-fashion than yesterday's rage. But Péguy was not only a creature of his time. As Manent's comments suggest —and as passages in *Temporal and Eternal* demonstrate—he was also a writer whose insights continue to resonate today. Péguy was above all an apostle of the firsthand, the present reality, the rootedness in lived experience. Hence his repudiation of all efforts to deal with things by proxy. "The modern idea," he wrote in a passage on historiography that Manent quotes,

> the modern method comes down essentially to this: given a work or given a text, how do we proceed to know it? Let us start by ignoring the text; above all let us be careful not to pick up the text or even to look at it, that would come at the end, if it were ever to happen. Let us begin at the beginning or rather because we must be complete, let us begin by the beginning of the beginning; the beginning of the beginning is to find in the vast, moving, universal, total reality, the exact vantage point which, though bearing some relation to the text, is the farthest removed from the text.

Anyone who has followed the divagations of contemporary literary criticism or museological practice will know what Péguy means.

That much of what he had to say about the modern world is unwelcome and falls on deaf ears is naturally another element in Péguy's neglect. The criticisms he formulated are unflattering to modern vanities, especially our apparently unassailable sense of self-importance and self-sufficiency. But of course that is precisely why Péguy's work is valuable and worth recalling. "If Péguy is susceptible to looking bizarre in our contemporary eyes," Manent notes, "it is only because he was much more concrete and real than we ordinarily care to be."

I would argue only with Manent's "only." Let us grant Péguy's vividness and "reality," qualities that when overdone do seem bizarre. There is also the matter of Péguy's style. Eliot regretted its being "too emphatic, too insistent." But that's only part of the problem. One of Péguy's critics tartly remarked that Péguy "lacked the one talent that would have made him a great pamphleteer: brevity."

His poem *Eve*, written in 1914, begins with what have become among Péguy's most famous lines:

> *Heureux ceux qui sont morts pour la terre charnelle*
> *Mais pourvu que ce fût une juste guerre.*

("Happy are those who die for the carnal earth/ but only if it be for a just war.") Péguy embroiders his theme for 1911 quatrains—that is 7643 alexandrine lines and a concluding hemistich, making *Eve* one of the longest poems in French.

In both his poetry and his prose, Péguy favored repetition. A word, a line, an image would be taken up over and over again, slightly varied, often repeated outright. His style was at once accretive, like a pearl, and relentless, like a tidal wave. It doesn't work for everyone. When François Mauriac was told that someone was translating *Le Mystère de la Charité de Jeanne d'Arc* into English, he said "What a pity someone does not translate him into French." Not entirely fair, but having sampled a bit of Péguy in French I know what he means.

Musing in 1910 on Péguy's style, André Gide produced a baroque correlative:

> Péguy's style is like that of very ancient litanies. It is like Arab chants, like the monotonous chants of heath and moor; it is comparable to the desert; a desert of esparto, a desert of sand, a desert of stone. . . . Péguy's style is like the pebbles of the desert which follow and resemble each other so closely, one so much like the other, but yet a tiny bit different; and with a difference which corrects itself, recovers possession of itself, repeats itself, seems to repeat itself, stresses itself, and always more clearly.

And so on. Gide meant to be flattering. But

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what might be admirable in a verbal construct is not necessarily readable.

Thanks to the chaperoning of translators, readers of Péguy in English encounter this aspect of his work in much diluted form. (Alexander Dru, noting the "plodding gait" of Péguy's prose, claimed that he attempted "to prune the style in order to reveal the fruit.") One result is that Péguy is mostly known—to the extent that he is known at all—as the author of one-liners. I have already mentioned his marvelous observation about acts of cowardice motivated by the fear of not looking sufficiently progressive. He has many others nearly as good:

> Tyranny is always better organized than freedom.
>
> Surrender is essentially an operation by means of which we set about explaining instead of acting.
>
> Homer is new and fresh this morning, and nothing, perhaps, is as old and tired as today's newspaper.
>
> A word is not the same with one writer as with another. One tears it from his guts. The other pulls it out of his overcoat pocket.
>
> He who does not bellow the truth when he knows the truth makes himself the accomplice of liars and forgers.

The last two, especially, are characteristic of Péguy's—what to call it?—his style, his outlook, his personality.

But Péguy was more than a coiner of epigrams. No one would accuse him of being a systematic thinker, but he was an unusually candid one. He was born in modest circumstances in 1873 in Orléans, Joan of Arc's birthplace. His father, a carpenter, died several months later, and Péguy was raised by his mother and grandmother. They eked out a living recaning chairs, a craft that Péguy also practiced occasionally in his youth to help maintain the family coffers. Péguy later paraded his "peasant" background—rather overstating (or perhaps I mean "understating") his origins, but he regarded an earthy provenance as a patent of authenticity. (It was an attitude that underlay his ardent nationalism.) Péguy early on displayed academic promise, won a scholarship to the Ecole normale supérieure, but failed part of his examination and left without taking a degree. Overall, his academic performance was indifferent. By the time he was twenty, Péguy had ceased practicing his native Roman Catholicism, declared himself a socialist, and worked running a socialist bookshop in the Latin Quarter. When his closest friend died in 1896, Péguy determined that duty required him to marry his friend's sister, which he did the following year. They had four children, the youngest of whom was born in 1915, after Péguy's death. In 1898, Péguy used his wife's inheritance to open his own bookshop, located near the Sorbonne, which he studiously mismanaged and brought to the brink of bankruptcy within a year.

In 1900, he started the *Cahiers de la Quinzaine* ("Fortnightly Notebooks"), the journal that he ran until his death and in which most of his work first appeared. As F. C. St. Aubyn writes in his book on Péguy,

> his editorial policy was idealistic. No advertising was to be accepted for fear of inhibiting the freedom of expression. Those interested in the review would support it financially according to a sliding scale of ability to pay. All points of view were welcome. No manuscript would be censored although the author might later find himself the object of a strongly worded rebuttal if his ideas differed from those of Péguy.

Péguy's journal was a distinguished but not quite indispensable publication—though to call it a publication tells only half the story. It was almost a way of life. Contributors included Maurice Barrès, Julien Benda, Anatole France, Daniel Halévy, Romain Rolland, André Suarès, and Jean Juarès—a respectable roster of semi-luminaries that,

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one notes, does not include such incandescent names as Gide, Proust, and Apollinaire. At any one time there were only a few hundred subscribers, but the *Cahiers* seem to have formed the center of their intellectual universe. Thursdays Péguy was "at home" to a dozen or so friends who dropped by to discuss the events of the day. Controversy and contention were always in order. "A review only continues to have life if each issue annoys at least one-fifth of its readers," Péguy wrote. "Justice lies in seeing that it is not always the same fifth."

In 1908, Péguy startled his friends by announcing his return to the Catholic faith (but not quite to the Catholic church: he remained hostile to the institution). Péguy continued to regard himself as a socialist, but here, too, his allergy to "parties" and institutions made him an unreliable ally. One admirer said that Péguy's socialism was "far more akin to the socialism of Saint Francis than to that of Karl Marx."

Perhaps. He liked to remind his readers that he was pursuing "none other than The Eternal Salvation of France," etc. Alexander Dru is probably right to argue that attempting to label Péguy politically is "a waste of time." He was too idiosyncratic, not to say erratic. Or perhaps it would be better to say that he was too stalwart in following his own conscience to make a good member of any party. Until the last four or five years of his life, the vast majority of Péguy's writing was polemical. There was always a lyric strain in his sensibility. But until 1910, when he fell in love with Blanche Raphaël, a longtime friend, that lyricism showed itself sporadically. Péguy remained faithful to his wife, but his new emotional attachment probably helps explain the huge outpouring of poetry in his last years. Péguy was a lieutenant in the reserves; it is said that when war was declared in August 1914, he left off writing in mid-sentence to join the mobilization. On the first day of the first battle of the Marne, about twenty-five kilometers from Paris, Péguy was felled by a bullet through the head. "For God's sake, push ahead!" are said to have been his last words. He was forty-one.

At the center of *Notre Jeunesse*, as at the center of Péguy's life, was the Dreyfus affair. It is difficult for us to comprehend the riveting importance of this episode for French life at the turn of the century. In its divisiveness, it was like the Vietnam War in American society, only more so. The fate of Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish army captain on the French general staff who was falsely accused of spying, was a lightning rod, a catalyst, a test of will and political good faith. Everyone took sides. And, as Proust noted midway through *A la recherche*, "The waves of the two currents of Dreyfusism and anti-Dreyfusism divided France from top to bottom." The affair officially lasted from 1894, when Dreyfus was first court-martialed and sent to prison on Devil's Island, until 1906, when he was finally reinstated. In fact, its repercussions lasted decades. The army, the old-guard of society, the Catholic church hierarchy were adamantly against Dreyfus; enlightened opinion was tirelessly on his side. It was not simply a matter of anti-semitism, a virulent species of which erupted throughout France. The Dreyfus Affair was one of those world-defining, world-changing occurrences whose ramifications are all the more surprising because unexpected. "There is nothing," Péguy noted, "so unforeseen as an event."

Péguy was from the beginning of the affair a passionate Dreyfusard. By 1910, when he wrote *Notre Jeunesse*, he had invested the event with nearly cosmic significance. For him the Dreyfus Affair did not merely dramatize an instance of justice violated and set right. It was the stage upon which the soul of modern man struggled for significance. The Dreyfus Affair was bound up with the future of the French Republic and the future of France as a Christian society. He saw in the Dreyfus Affair and its aftermath an emblematic movement of history in which the fate of society was at stake. "Everything," Péguy wrote in one of his most quoted

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aphorisms, "begins in mysticism [*la mystique*] and ends in politics [*la politique*]."

Péguy wrote *Notre Jeunesse* as a response to—and an attack upon—a long essay by his friend Daniel Halévy about the Dreyfus Affair in the *Cahiers*. Halévy, too, was a staunch Dreyfusard. But he did not, as Péguy saw it, understand that the terms of the debate had been transformed utterly in the years following Dreyfus's reinstatement. Over the years, supporters of Dreyfus had hardened into the party of Dreyfus. They had lost the spontaneity and faith that had originally fueled their cause. The division was no longer between Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards, but between those who had succumbed to the inert, tabulating spirit of modernity and those who understood that culture was something deeper and more vital. "Dreyfusism triumphant" had capitulated to the sterility of party domination just as thoroughly as had the anti-Dreyfusards years before.

For Péguy, it was not enough to be on the right side of the debate, because the debate was fundamentally about more than choosing the right side. It was about the direction of the modern world. He was "horrified," he wrote, to discover that what was "to us an instinct has for the young become a matter of *propositions* . . . a matter of logic." Péguy hoped to show "what culture is, and how utterly different from (infinitely more precious than) science, archaeology, a doctrine, erudition, and, of course, a system. You will see what culture was like before the professors crushed it."

In Péguy's mind, the Dreyfus Affair had originally called forth a kind of heroism that had been sadly depleted by the institutionalization of its own success. He lamented

> the world we call . . . the modern world. The world that tries to be clever. The world of the intelligent, of the advanced, of those who know, . . . who have nothing more to learn. The world of those who are not had on by fools. Like us. *That is to say:* the world of those who believe in nothing, not even in atheism, who devote themselves, who sacrifice themselves to nothing. *More precisely* the world of those without a *mystique*. And who boast of it.

As far as I know, Péguy never attempted to define what he meant by *la mystique*. Doubtless he would have regarded the exercise as an example of precisely the sort of degradation he was warning against: the movement of "organic" (a favorite word) plenitude to lifeless rationalism. In part, I suppose, Péguy was issuing the same sort of admonition that Walter Bagehot, writing about the English monarchy, made about the fragile but indispensable charisma of the throne: "We must not," Bagehot wrote, "let in daylight upon magic." Warning about the extent to which politics was "devouring" *la mystique*, Péguy was calling attention to the non-rational currents of life that nourish healthy institutions and preserve reason from rationalism.

Clearly, Péguy was a kind of romantic. Much that he had to say about the differences among nations, the French "race," etc., seems curiously dated, even odious, to our twenty-first-century ears. As Manent noted, "Péguy did not go so far as to say that a German saint was an impossibility, a contradiction in terms, but it must be said that he came close to it." Perhaps Péguy's notion of *la mystique* is similar to what Kant meant by an "aesthetical idea": a "representation of the imagination which occasions much thought, without however any definite thought, i.e., any *concept* being capable of being adequate to it." But I think there was more to it than that. It is easy to dismiss a figure like Péguy. His enthusiasms are embarrassingly frank, his rhetoric volatile, his categories clumsy. But he saw something essential about the spiritual aridity of modern rationalism, the attempt to reduce life to a calculus of competing interests. We live in a world increasingly determined by the administrative imperative Péguy recoiled from. In such a world, Péguy's ambition to "introduce uneasiness" and open the door to "commotion" is a necessary corrective.

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We are waging a just war

by David Pryce-Jones

The terrorist attack on the United States in September will have grave repercussions over the whole world for years to come. The purpose behind the attack was to separate America and its allies from everyone else, and the Muslim world in particular. For the past decade or so, Muslim extremists have been on the march, fighting neighbors of other religions wherever they find them: Hindus in Kashmir, Jews in Israel, Orthodox Russians in Chechnya, animists and Christians in Africa. In the perspective of the suicide bombers, Americans are Westerners but also Christians, therefore the principal legitimate objects of holy war. These Muslim extremists have been trying to open their version of an ideological and armed struggle with global implications: Muslims and as much of the Third World as possible versus democracy. This ambition is now out in the open.

Put in familiar European terms, this attack is the equivalent of the German occupation of the Rhineland in 1936. The failure of Britain and France to rise to that occasion led Hitler to the conclusion that no matter how aggressive he was the democracies would always prefer appeasement to war. A similar failure now to rise to the occasion will place every democratic country in jeopardy. All manner of changes in attitudes towards security, asylum, and human rights have to be envisaged as the open society takes measures to defend itself.

The democracies are not on their own in the coming struggle, but time and intelligence are needed in order to prepare for what lies ahead. The Muslim world does not present a unified bloc. On the contrary, it is split by sectarian and ethnic disputes as well as by internal power struggles. The extremists represent a small—though no doubt growing—minority. Destroying everything before them, they have already provoked civil war in Algeria, Sudan, and Afghanistan, and they have destabilized Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, the Palestine Authority, and not least Pakistan. The response of these countries' respective leaders is critical to American success.

The terrorist attack on America serves as a last-minute warning to moderate Muslim leaders to mend their ways and join the extremists. Backed into such a corner, the Pakistani President Musharraf has instead dropped the Taliban and sided outright with America. Egypt, far and away the most influential Arab country, is dancing on a tightrope because it too has long been under continuous threat from its extremists. Muammar Qaddafi in Libya and General Omar Bashir in Sudan have similarly decided that they have more to fear from their extremists than from the United States. About a dozen terror groups have bases in or around Damascus, but the young president Bashar Assad may not necessarily protect them. In one of the customary internal power struggles of the Muslim world,

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Iran is suspicious of the Taliban, and for the first time in years at least some of its leaders are not preaching "Death to America" in the mosques. A wise America will hold a heavy stick behind its back and in its hand as enticing a bunch of carrots as possible, including remission of debt, trade advantages, and political support against extremists. This is, essentially, a hearts and minds operation.

A fantasy is loose in the world, the fantasy of an Islamic supremacy that is destined to triumph everywhere. Some of its advocates claim that eventually Christian countries will become Muslim, in what would amount to a reverse colonialism. Like Communism before it, this Islamic extremism aims to impose its vision on others and call it universal peace. Here, in an unexpected form, is another totalitarian movement. Like all such movements, it does not hesitate to use violence. True believers in each and every totalitarianism always take their stand on the specious and murderous grounds that the ends justify the means.

The huge majority of Muslims understand only too clearly that the extremists do not speak in their name but are likely to unleash Armageddon on all, and they view this with horror. The escape of so many millions of refugees from Afghanistan, for instance, is a public vote of no-confidence in the Taliban. For some, even unknown Nauru—the world's smallest independant republic—is evidently preferable to home. Untold millions of Muslims long to emigrate to the West, whose freedom and prosperity are the stuff of their dreams.

Needless to say, this Islamic fantasy has nothing to do with Islam proper, a religion like all other great religions, with a genuine vision of justice and equality at its core. Indeed, the damage that the Islamic triumphalist fantasy does to Islam as well as Muslim countries and peoples is at least as severe and dangerous as the damage it does to democracy. The same was true about other totalitarianisms: Nazism utterly ruined Germany, Communism utterly ruined Russia.

To judge by their reported conduct, the recent suicide bombers were living in an atmosphere that had nothing to do with Islam. According to Islamic teaching, whoever commits suicide is condemned to hell. Their central purpose, then, was contrary to their religion. They had shaved off their beards, they spent time in bars, they became drunk, they frequented strip clubs. They carried rolls of hundred dollar bills and spent them ostentatiously. We may suppose that at some level, consciously or unconsciously, they were enjoying the America they were planning to destroy. For it is here, in a most complex relationship of attraction and repulsion, that we must begin to understand the motivations of the terrorists, and so frame our responses.

Each man kills the thing he loves, in the famous words of Oscar Wilde. Premeditated killing of unknown people in an act that simultaneously kills oneself requires a life-denying hate so exceptional that it is in a realm of fanaticism all its own. Such hate signifies a total human failure. This corresponds to the turmoil of the Muslim world today. Each and every Muslim country faces intractable problems of demography, lack of resources and skills, ethnic and religious strife, and selfish government; each and every Muslim suffers from this jumble of assorted ills.

As if that were not enough, Muslim extremists and even some moderates have come to believe that everything wrong with their world is the fault of the Jews. This is partly a relic from the tribal past, and partly another mistaken interpretation of the present. They think in a sort of syllogism. Jews are wicked by definition. America helps Jews. Therefore America is wicked. And yet another false syllogism: Saddam Hussein is an Arab, America wishes to remove Saddam Hussein, therefore America persecutes Arabs. Years will have to pass before the extremists grasp that the humane and democratic values that unite Israel and America serve no conspiratorial anti-Islamic purposes. But that is the context in which America must now operate.

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The causes of today's turmoil go deep into the roots of history. The major intellectual developments of the West—the Renaissance with its concept of humanism and the Age of Enlightenment during which scientific principles by and large replaced religious dogma—passed the Muslim world by. Muslims everywhere were in the grip of the absolute system of one-man despotism that they had inherited from their forebears and that they believed protected their religion and identity. Western energy and creativity of which they were unaware duly overwhelmed them, and they could do nothing about it. There were Muslim rulers who resisted, and their names have entered Muslim and Western lore alike: Emir Abdel Kader in Algeria, Shamyl in the Caucasus, the Mahdi with his Sudanese dervishes, the so-called Mad Mullah of Berbera.

A nineteenth-century Muslim philosopher, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, spoke for all such. He did not hesitate to stigmatize Muslims as backward. He swung between extreme self-pity about their common plight and ferocious insistence that the remedy lay in violence. Putting his finger on what he thought was the crux of the matter, he wrote, "It is amazing that it was precisely the Christians who invented Krupp's cannons and the machine gun before the Muslims." The analysis was false; stemming from science, improved weaponry carried no religious connotation. But al-Afghani succeeded in imprinting throughout the Muslim world a sense of inferiority to the West. The Muslim masses, otherwise proud people, came to see the West as an entity deliberately out to shame and humiliate them. Today's Islamic fantasy springs from this mindset in which self-pity and revenge go hand in hand.

Two alternatives were open to Muslims in practice. One was to retreat into the fortress of Muslim identity and reject the West. Numberless groups and organizations have chosen that course, from the Muslim Brotherhood to Hamas and Islamic Jihad and Hizballah today, as well as the Taliban and their proxy, Osama bin Laden. They see themselves engaged in a war on two fronts, against the West and against opponents who are fellow Muslims. They live out the triumphalist fantasy.

The other alternative was to seek to discover the source of European energy and mastery. In every colonized Muslim country leaders believed that nationalism was the great western secret, and accordingly they formed nationalist movements, and ultimately nationalist states. Islamic extremists and nationalists shared a common need to acquire European weapons. Either way, in order for Muslims to recover their pride, a test of strength with the Europeans was built into the future.

After the Second World War, the colonial powers no longer had interests in the Middle East that they deemed worth a real test of strength, and they retreated. The encounter so far between Muslims and the West had been a profound movement of history with pluses and minuses for both sides. But at least the end of colonialism seemed to absolve Muslims, and in particular Arabs, from the sense of shame tormenting them.

For fifty years and more, the Muslim world has been independent, free to organize as it wishes, and, moreover, several Muslim countries are beneficiaries of a petrodollar bonanza, which they can dispose of for any end they like. Throughout this period Muslim and Arab rulers have plumped for the outward signs of Western life, such as high-rise buildings, hospitals, and colleges. They have imported modernity as though it were a commodity like any other. But once again, in an incomplete and misleading analysis of the position, they did not recognize that the true source of Western strength lay in a democratic political system that liberated people's energies and had nothing to do with nationalism.

Instead, the leaders of nationalist movements lost no time in promoting themselves absolute one-man rulers of their own countries. Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt was the model for them all. The result has been a

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present-day mimicry of the historic despotisms of the past. Nothing like democracy exists in the Muslim world, where Turkey alone has ever experienced a change of government through a free and unrigged election, and there only once. Parliaments exist to rubberstamp the ruler's decrees. There is no freedom of speech or of assembly, no civil rights, but only the dreaded secret police, prisons, torture, and execution. The injustice is flagrant. Corruption is everywhere. Excluded from any say, the masses still have no control over their destiny, but they are able to protest only through a riot. Power changes hands by assassination or coup. In the absence of mechanisms for power-sharing and mediation, every national and international conflict of interest degenerates into a test of strength.

Muslims and Arabs have nobody to blame but themselves for so disastrous a social and political failure. There are intellectuals who point this out, but they are few. It is far more comforting to displace the blame on to others. At the very end of 1978, Ayatollah Khomeini carefully staged a coup in Iran and seized power from the shah. In a large and potentially rich country, he was able to bring up-to-date al-Afghani's expressions of self-pity and revenge.

Muslims, the ayatollah held, were weak because the West had deliberately made them so. It was another self-serving falsehood. In reality the West displays a yawning indifference to all manifestations of religion, but the ayatollah crystallized the contemporary Islamic fantasy that the West is actually out to destroy Islam. In response, Muslims had the duty to unite against the West and all its works, especially in its most salient incarnation, America, dubbed the Great Satan. He advised Mikhail Gorbachev to show the way by converting to Islam. Nationalist rulers, Saddam Hussein for instance, had to be obliged to subscribe to his fantasy, if need be by war to the death.

Muslims everywhere, rich and poor, educated men like Osama bin Laden and illiterate youths, have eagerly absorbed Khomeini's prescriptions and formed an archipelago of conspiratorial groups in half the countries of the world, often clandestinely linked in a manner reminiscent of former Communist cells, volunteering to right the wrongs they believe to have been done to them, and to establish an Islamic utopia. Many of them take advantage of Western medicine, technology, and education, depending on these benefits that they are unable to provide for themselves. The contradiction powers the grievance, impotence, and hate of their fantasy.

The suicide bombers have at last engaged the United States in a test of strength according to their standards. Muslim—and especially Arab—one-man rulers will be watching for signs that the United States understands the stakes and has the resolve to act as it should. If they detect weakness in Washington, they will have no choice but to pay lip-service to the Islamic fantasy and at least pretend to join the ideological war against the West. Anything less leaves them at the mercy of assassination or a coup undertaken by extremists. American strength and determination to see this through, however, will encourage them to join the coalition of Western allies. As was exactly the case in forming the earlier coalition to fight the Gulf War against Saddam Hussein, they and others in their position must be sure to end on the winning side.

For the present, we do not know whether the suicide bombers had ultimate sponsorship from a Muslim or Arab state. Any such state must also be brought to account, if necessary by an outright invasion that leads to a change of regime. This is a just war if ever there was one, in defence of life and liberty against an ideological enemy. If the United States and its allies were to retreat from the test of strength imposed on them, or botch it somehow through inadequate preparation or loss of will, then the extremists will conclude that they have the West on the run. They will strive on for victory. Who can guess how far hate and killing will then spread, or how destructive it will prove for mankind.

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Dwight Macdonald: sunburned by ideas

by Joseph Epstein

At a 1980 symposium at Skidmore College set in motion by a normally portentous essay by George Steiner about the death of culture in America, Dwight Macdonald, long established as a slashing critic of popular culture and politics, sitting on a panel on "Film and Theatre in America," seemed to have little of interest to say. He was seventy-four years old and a fairly serious boozer who had written almost nothing of interest for more than a decade. He seemed the intellectual equivalent of the boxer who has taken way too many shots to the head. His death by congestive heart failure was two years away. Reacting against the tendency in the discussion to take current-day movies and plays seriously, Macdonald emitted—one almost hears him muttering—a remark that could stand as the epigraph for his long career in intellectual journalism: "When I say 'no' I'm always right and when I say 'yes' I'm almost always wrong."

Dwight Macdonald was the intellectual par excellence, which is to say without any specialized knowledge he was prepared to comment on everything, boisterously and always with what seemed an unwavering confidence. He was the pure type of the amateur, and gloried in the status. And why not? "What's wrong with being an amateur," one easily imagines him saying. "Look where the professionals have got us."

Perhaps this is too much in the spirit of put-down. But then this was also Macdonald's reigning spirit, and possibly it is contagious. Answering a reader who accused him of taking a snide tone in an article on the Ford Foundation in *The New Yorker* in 1954, he put the blame for the article's tone on himself, writing: "after all, I've done a lot of 'snide' writing in my time, [and] am indeed rather an SOB, on paper at least."

I once greatly admired Dwight Macdonald, and I esteemed precisely that unforgiving, relentless SOB side of him above all. As a graduate of Mencken University, with a major in what I took to be anti-BS and a minor in radical politics, I thought Macdonald, when I first came across his writing in the late 1950s, next in succession to H. L. Mencken himself. To read Macdonald on the barbarity of General George S. Patton, the goofy gadgetry of Mortimer J. Adler's Syntopicon to the Great Books, the depredations upon the King James Bible committed by its new English translators was to hear melodious bells go off and have the sky fill with fireworks.

Macdonald got away with much that he did through style. The trick of this style was to be sharp and intimate simultaneously. He wrote to a correspondent that the secret to successful lecturing was to speak as if talking to no more than three or four people, and he seemed to write the same way. His general tone was that of the unconnable addressing the already highly skeptical. He never condescended to his readers, assuming that they were on his intellectual level.

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A brilliant counterpuncher, specializing in mockery of his opponents, he wrote unshapely essays in which the best things were often to be found in ungainly asterisk footnotes. His witticisms seemed truth-bearing. The first sentence of his article on the Ford Foundation ran: "The Ford Foundation is a large body of money completely surrounded by people who want some."

Born in 1906, the son of a father who was a lawyer and a mother with social pretensions, Dwight Macdonald was by background upper-middle class. He was a prep school boy (Exeter) and an Ivy League man (Yale), whose first job out of school was in the executive training program at Macy's. Yet straight out of the gate he was a rebel, antagonizer division. At Exeter, at fourteen, he and a friend formed a group called The Hedonists, whose motto was "*épater les bourgeois.*" Although as a young man he held many of the prejudices of his social class—racism, anti-Semitism—a strong belief in religion was not among them. "Literature and knowledge, wisdom and understanding, intellect, call it what you will, is my religion." These would be the gods he worshipped all his life.

"I have a prose mind," the young Dwight Macdonald wrote in college. "I want to write serious criticism." At first, though, he was swept away by the vigor of businessmen, whom he found "were keener, more efficient, more sure of their power than any college prof I ever knew." Upon discovering he had no mind for business, he took up a notion he found in reading Spengler: that there were Men of Truths and Men of Action, and he was clearly among the former. Even then he liked to have an idea—not yet an ideology—in support of any move he made.

Macdonald's next step was to a job at *Time* magazine, which he got through a Yale classmate. Henry Luce, one of the two founders of *Time*, was himself a Yalie, and for many years Yale functioned as a farm team of sorts for Time, Inc. Macdonald began by writing finance and business stories, and soon was transferred to *Fortune*, Luce's new magazine, devoted to chronicling the high romance of industry and commerce. He spoke well of Luce personally—though often mocking him, once referring to him as "Il Luce"—but Time, Inc. was a persistent force for evil in the culture drama that played in Macdonald's head. "For fourteen years," he wrote of his friend James Agee, "like an elephant learning to deploy a parasol, Agee devoted his prodigious gifts to Lucean journalism."

Feeling himself stifled by working for *Fortune*, Macdonald, with two Yale classmates, Fred Dupee and George L. K. Morris, began, as a moonlighting venture, a magazine called *Miscellany*, a bimonthly that lasted nearly two years. Through Dupee he was put in touch with Philip Rahv and William Phillips, who had recently removed the magazine *Partisan Review* out from under the Stalinist sway of the John Reed Club, and were looking for financial supporters to keep it alive. Along with Dupee and Morris, Macdonald became one of the magazine's five principal editors.

Macdonald had been drifting leftward. "Marx goes to the heart of the problem," he wrote to a college classmate in 1936. To the same man he wrote: "I'm growing more and more intolerant of those who stand—or rather squat—in the way of radical progress, the more I learn about the conservative businesses that run this country and the more I see of the injustices done people under this horrible capitalist system." Earlier he had noted that "my greatest vice is my easily aroused indignation—also, I suppose, one of my greatest strengths. I can work up a moral indignation quicker than a fat tennis player can work up a sweat." Over the years his similes would improve, if not his temperament.

By the time he was thirty, Macdonald was fully formed, intellectually and emotionally. Politically, he was anti-Stalinist and anti-statist yet also anti-capitalist. In the 1936 presidential election, he voted for Earl Browder, the Communist candidate. For a few years he was a member of the Trotskyite Worker Party. But he had only to join a

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group to find it objectionable and thus left the Workers Party in 1941. Trotsky himself had referred to him as a "Macdonaldist." (In an article left in his dictaphone machine before his death, he described a Macdonald piece as "very muddled and stupid.") Macdonald always took the high road—that "moral indignation" again—preferring clarity over complexity in politics and keeping a palette restricted to two colors, black and white, with very little interest in gray shadings or texture of any sort. His unwillingness to grant America the least virtue led him to make some impressively idiotic statements, notable among them: "Europe has its Hitlers, but we have our Rotarians."

He settled into a lifelong bumptiousness. His tone and spirit were heavily polemical. This was not helped by his drinking, which did not tend to make him more courtly. The ultimate art form of the *Partisan Review* crowd may have been the go-screw-yourself letter, which they were always sending one another: choice examples of Macdonald's use of the form are found in *A Moral Temper*, a new collection put together by his biographer Michael Wreszin.[1] These were letters written not to disable but to maim. In a milder variant on the form, Delmore Schwartz wrote to Macdonald:

> I always defend you among academics and the genteel (two of your curse words . . .) by saying: Yes antagonism for its own sake is his appetite and neurosis, and none of his political predictions come true, but he is a master of expository prose . . . and he opens himself up to all kinds of being and beings, Open House Macdonald ought to be his name.

Macdonald shot back: "In future, do me a favor and either keep silent or join the Enemy" and went on to chide Schwartz for not having "the guts to speak out on anything."

A Moral Temper is filled with amusing and interesting material, some of it unknown to me, who has long felt glutted with accounts of the New York Intellectuals. I knew that Macdonald's wife Nancy had served as business manager—the unknown soldier of most little magazines—of *Partisan Review*, but I didn't know that for a good spell much of the daily drudgery of bringing out the magazine fell to the Macdonalds, in whose Tenth Street Village apartment it was actually produced. At one point Macdonald wished to do away with Dupee and William Phillips as members of the editorial board and replace them with Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg. Macdonald felt that the magazine, bogged down in "Rahv's cautious negativistic policies," had become no more than a periodical anthology, publishing the best things sent to it, which may have had its uses, "but it's not the sort of magazine I would want to give any large amount of time to right now."

What Macdonald wanted was a more directly political magazine than *Partisan Review*. He was himself becoming ever more radicalized. He had turned into a mad letter writer, sending off little blasts to John Dewey, James B. Conway, Freda Kirchwey, and others, among them a letter to Edmund Wilson upbraiding him for not publicly attacking Malcolm Cowley for his Stalinism and Van Wyck Brooks for his insistence on patriotism from American writers.

Finally, in July of 1943, Macdonald resigned from *Partisan Review*, remarking that "the divergence is mainly political." He also had cultural objections to the drift of the journal. He felt that in its cultural coverage the magazine "has become rather academic," where he favored "a more informal, disrespectable, and chance-taking magazine, with a broader and less exclusive 'literary' approach." He claimed that his was the only Marxist point of view on the editorial board.

But the true stumbling point was disagreement about the right position to take on World War II. Macdonald was against siding with the Allies in the war. His Marx-

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1 *A Moral Temper: The Letters of Dwight Macdonald*, edited by Michael Wreszin; Ivan R. Dee, 480 pages, $35.

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ist outlook, combined with a newly burgeoning pacificism, persuaded him that the war was little more than one among capitalist imperial powers, excluding the Soviet Union, which, as an anti-Stalinist, he viewed as a totalitarian nation. He thought the war a mistake because it didn't confront the issue of social class and wasn't really a war about democracy. He was an advocate of what was then known as a "Third Camp" position, between fascism and Stalinism, which would be truly revolutionary socialism. Only an intellectual, as Orwell said in another connection, could be so stupid.

All an intellectual has, it sometimes seems, is his integrity. This he guards as a Boston virgin guards her chastity. What integrity means for most intellectuals is proper alignment of their opinions. Perfect consistency bestows that condition devoutly to be sought, ideological purity. "Ideas and principles were what was important to Dwight, not the politics—nor the historical context," wrote Michael Wreszin in his biography. He is correct in saying that Macdonald did not tailor his writing "to fit an effective political agenda." What mattered more for him was establishing a right alignment of opinion such that he could never be accused of contradiction, inconsistency, impurity—God forfend, selling out.

No little magazine was perhaps more pure than *Politics*, which Macdonald and his wife founded soon after their departure from *Partisan Review*. I had not come into cultural consciousness in time to read *Politics*, but I do recall buying in 1962 a remaindered copy of *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*—later, in paperback, retitled *Politics Past*—which contained much of Macdonald's political writing from the magazine. Even his stylishness cannot survive what now seems the aridity of most of the subject matter: political journalism disappears faster than passion in a brothel on the equator. One can only wonder in bemused astonishment at the perversity of political thinking that, in May 1947, can lead an intelligent person to write: "If we admit there are only two alternatives in world polities, USA or USSR, and if we find it impossible, from the standpoint of our own values and hopes, to choose either, where are we?" In need, I'd say, of a mental gyroscope.

Yet there was something gallant, even heroic about the one-man (and wife) stand entailed in putting out *Politics*. Macdonald did it on the savings from his relatively lucrative salary at *Fortune* and his wife's small trust fund, which brought in $4000 a year. He stayed on the case of his contributors, whom he couldn't have been paying very much, to produce quality prose. He tells the young Irving Howe that an article he wrote for the magazine on Walter Reuther is "lousy." He eliminated straight literary criticism from the magazine and gave great prominence to popular culture, which he viewed as helping to barbarize the country. He took potshots at such "lib-labs" and "Stalinoids," as he called them, as Henry Steele Commager, Carey McWilliams, and I. F. Stone. He published the odd, sometimes important piece that might not have found a place elsewhere: Simone Weil on *The Iliad*; Bruno Bettelheim on the concentration camps in Germany. Paul Goodman, Daniel Bell, C. Wright Mills were among the American contributors to the magazine; Andrea Caffi, Victor Serge, and Macdonald's dear friend Nicola Chiaromonte were the leading European contributors.

But at the heart of everything was Macdonald, a three-armed Italian policemen, directing the heavy traffic in competing ideologies, isms, and political schisms. "Negativism remained Dwight's single weapon," his biographer wrote, "a purity in *Politics* and in politics, too, that had its comforts but offered little in the way of genuine political activism."

Brutal in argument though he could be, foolish about other's people's reactions to him though he was ("What I don't know about human relations," he confessed during the tumult of leaving his first for his second wife), confident though he was that he was in possession of the truth, there was, in his private life, more give, more of a sense of

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fairness and largeness of spirit to Dwight Macdonald than his hard-edged writing conveyed. He could command objectivity; he didn't always take things personally.

Although his *bien pensant* friends professed not to understand his liking for William F. Buckley, Jr., and although he attacked the *National Review* for its stylelessness, Macdonald always defended Buckley as a nice man, or, as he told F. W. Dupee, "a hard guy to hate." When late in life someone told him that Borges was a right-winger, he replied, "Who gives a fuck? When you're that good it doesn't matter any more."

Politics ran between 1943 and 1949. Burnout for its editor set in roughly midway. The magazine went from a monthly to a bimonthly to a quarterly, and sometimes issues came out wildly late or missed appearing altogether. To the financial strain—"Everything I get involved in seems to be a way of not making money, or of losing it"—was added political dubiety: "I have lost my faith in any general and radical improvement in modern society whether by Marxian socialism or pacifist persuasion and ethical example," he wrote to a subscriber in 1949. In an item in its issue of July 1944, Macdonald wrote, "I have always had a sneaking admiration for the editors of a tiny mimeographed journal called *Proletarian Outlook* who once asked the usual leftist question, 'What is to be done?' and answered it unexpectedly: 'Nothing, absolutely nothing.' . . . and the editors showed they were in earnest by folding up their paper." In 1949, to the dismay of his small band of loyal readers —among them T. S. Eliot—Macdonald did the same with *Politics*.

Sectarian Macdonald might from current perspectives seem, but he was not so far out of the main currents of the intellectual life of his time. He was always anti-Stalinist. In 1949 he wrote to William Phillips that "I'm fairly sure Hiss is guilty." He had his doubts about the whole radical perspective on life generally: "Don't you feel," he wrote to Joan Colebrook, with whom he was having an affair, "that we've all been on the wrong track all our lives—by 'we' I mean myself and the milieu I've lived in so long here in NYC." To a reader of *Politics* he noted: "I no longer see any political (or . . . historical) reality in such all-or-nothing doctrines as revolutionary socialism or pacificism."

Freed from sectarian politics, Macdonald turned to cultural criticism. This entailed an examination of contemporary cultural products for what they might yield in the way of insight into the presuppositions and inner workings of the larger society in which they were produced. Cultural criticism gave him what fame he would enjoy as a writer and made him a larger figure than he had hitherto seemed, or perhaps even dreamed. In the 1960s, he was briefly employed to do ten-minute bits on movies for NBC's "Today Show." Outside academic life, among critics in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s perhaps only Edmund Wilson was better known. In large measure, this was owing to the magazines for which he had begun to write—*The New Yorker* and, later, *Esquire*, for whom he wrote about movies.

In culture, Macdonald was a traditionalist, which meant an elitist, while remaining politically a man of the left. An "anarcho-conservative" was one of the labels he used to describe his own position in this middle period. When tension between the two appeared, the conservative in him tended to win out over the anarchist. He never went for the Beats in America nor the Angry Young Men in England. He despised the watering down of culture—which supplied the powerful animus to his attacks on the Great Books, the revised Bible, and the new *Webster's*—and in devising his own theory of culture made use of the conservative Albert Jay Nock's *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man*.

The quickest way to Dwight Macdonald's heart—with, that is, a dagger—was to call him "our best journalist." Paul Goodman did so, when reviewing *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* in *Dissent*. Macdonald took this to mean that he was fundamentally unserious. "For what is a journalist?," he shot back in a letter to the editor. "Alas, an ignorant and

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superficial fellow, a kibitzer (rather than 'a man determined to a goal of action and truth')." Macdonald felt himself a thinker, subtle, discriminating, penetrating.

As a writer, he was a sprinter, not a marathon man, and while his dream was the book, his form was the essay. Over the years in his letters he refers to plans to write books on modern dictatorship, misconceptions about capitalism, Communism and fascism, the steel industry, Edgar Allan Poe, an intellectual autobiography, mass culture, and the Kennedy assassination. Enchanted cigarettes, Balzac called such books, works that exist ever so beautifully only in a writer's mind as the smoke of fantasy forms before him. Macdonald got furthest perhaps on a book on mass culture, but what he produced, a sixty-five-page essay titled "Masscult & Midcult," shows that he probably didn't have a full book on the subject in him.

Along with "The Responsibility of Peoples"—his essay about collective guilt after World War Two—"Masscult & Midcult" is Macdonald's most ambitious intellectual effort. A rerun of the old highbrow, middlebrow, lowbrow triad developed by Russell Lynes, the essay is a characteristic performance. Written with not a little dash, it struggles to cut deep without quite being able to do so, despite an early Adorno quotation and much waving about of the flag of classical modernism: two Picassos rampant upon a field of *Finnegans Wake*.

"Masscult & Midcult" has two chief concerns. The first is to make the case that mass entertainment is "an instrument of domination." The second is that Midcult, or the middlebrow, will infect true High Culture, and its values "instead of being transitional —'the price of progress'—may now themselves become a debased, permanent standard." Some good things get said along the way. Of the Lords of Kitsch, as he calls them, Macdonald says "never underestimate the ignorance and vulgarity of publishers, movie producers, network executives, and other architects of Masscult." He declares "a tepid ooze of Midcult is spreading everywhere," which seems to me also correct, though this was predictable with the rise of higher (half-) education.

Yet one wishes Macdonald had taken on tougher cases in this essay. He attacks *Our Town*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, Archibald MacLeish's play *J.B.*, and Stephen Vincent Benét's poem *John Brown's Body* as examples of Midcult, when it would have been much more interesting to consider instead, say, *The Death of a Salesman*, *The Naked and the Dead*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and the poetry of Mark Van Doren. The essay also posits a prelapsarian time for culture, with patron-aristocrats cultivating beautiful gardens of art while the happy peasantry enjoyed the purest of folk art. The existence of this ample art-sensitive aristocracy is surely a fiction; and the lower classes of golden olden days, one does well to remember, had such charming divertissements as bearbaiting, dogfights, and gin drinking to keep their minds off the plow.

As for the old leftist question, "What is to be done?," Macdonald's best answer is that we recognize that we really have two cultures, high (or authentic) and the rest (inauthentic), "that have developed in this country, and that it is the national interest to keep them separate." He closes by noting: "Let the majority eavesdrop if they like, but their tastes should be firmly ignored."

Two cultures we now have—have had, shall always have—but I wonder if we need be much concerned about the elitism of high culture, chiefly because it is a democratic elite. In the United States, most of the people who both create and respond to high culture do not derive from the upper- or even the upper-middle classes. They have come instead in greater numbers from the lower-middle and middle classes. Nor have most of them gone to the putatively best schools. Many of the people I know who are in on the secret of the superiority of high culture have come to it by accident, almost magically, through the luck of encountering an important teacher, book, recording, or exhibition. Luck of all good

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luck, a spark ignited the flame of a passion that didn't burn out.

Things can be done through education to insure that some sparks continue to go off and that flames, once ignited, may be sustained. But railing against mass culture is so much howling in the wind. Smashing the pretenses of middlebrow culture that wants to pass itself off as more serious than it is is something else again, and always worth doing, and this in his time Dwight Macdonald did as well as anyone in the business.

But the question is whether he did anything more. A search of his writings reveals nothing original about his critical opinions. He discovered no new writers or filmmakers, nor revived the reputations of any whose reputations were in need of revival. He slashed James Gould Cozzens's bestselling novel, ignoring his earlier, more impressive work, yet fell for the elevated clichés of Norman Mailer. As a critic of culture, Macdonald fired away out of the secure cockpit of received intellectual opinion. He shot a spitball at Cozzens, for example, for being on record as admiring Somerset Maugham. Would he be shocked, I wonder, to be told that Somerset Maugham is a better writer than Virginia Woolf?

With the exception of a rather disappointing piece on Buster Keaton written near the end of his life, he wrote no extended appreciations of a writer nor any other artist. No one ever accused Macdonald the critic of fairness, evenhandedness, disinterestedness. His was chiefly a polemical mind, quick, sharp, smart, but without much in the way of texture, balance, concern with complexity.

In *Armies of the Night* (1968), his account of the anti-Vietnam War protest march on the Pentagon, Norman Mailer describes himself, Robert Lowell, and Dwight Macdonald as "America's best poet, best novelist, and best critic." This is a judgment of all three men that hasn't held up, but it is one made in the first place more on political than literary grounds—as, in 1968, almost all cultural judgments tended to be.

By the time of *Armies of the Night*, Macdonald was all but finished as a writer. As early as 1961 to John Lukacs, who was always encouraging him to be better than he was, he wrote:

> John, I am simply not in a state of mind to discuss seriously what I should be writing. This impasse, this long drawn-out depression, must end sometime. I am aware that it exists and that what I am now writing is not what I should be doing.

He was doing factual pieces for *The New Yorker*, but they seemed not to give him—or his readers—much pleasure. "Fact is, I'm sick to death of doing *New Yorker* fact pieces. . . . Exposition bores me. Let them Look It Up themselves, I say."

Macdonald's biographer describes but does not attempt to explain his writing block. Depression is mentioned; so is heavy drinking and the ineluctable fact of getting older. The general explanation for writing block that I prefer is absence of fresh ideas, which I suspect applies in Dwight Macdonald's case. In one of his letters, he makes the point that the best method for commercial writing—the edge of the hack—is not to care about your subject. But Macdonald was never that kind of writer. Without passion, for him, all interest was drained.

Politics temporarily saved—or, depending on one's point of view, permanently sunk—him. Always anti-Stalinist, sometime in the 1950s, with Stalin now dead, he crossed the line to become anti-anti-Communist. At one point, he was scheduled to replace Irving Kristol as co-editor with Stephen Spender of *Encounter*, the excellent English monthly. Doubts about Macdonald's reliability set in and instead he was offered the job at excellent pay as roving correspondent for the magazine. He wrote a piece called "America! America!," a standard attack on United States materialism (those tail fins on the cars, all those television sets, and—would you believe it?—none of the feeling of community one finds in Tuscany), that was rejected by *Encounter*, with much

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anger on Macdonald's part. When it was later revealed that *Encounter* had had financial support from the CIA, he wrote that he was an "unwitting" accomplice of the CIA's "dirty work" and had been "played for a sucker." (If Macdonald were writing this piece, an asterisk would now appear, directing readers to a footnote that would read: "Any attempt on his part to return the money is unknown.")

In 1967, he switched his column in *Esquire* from movies to politics. The Free Speech Movement at the universities had let loose the young middle-class masses, the Vietnam War had the country in a state of full-time agitation, first Lyndon Johnson and then that great punch-up Bozo doll Richard Nixon were in the White House—bliss it was in that dawn to be alive, but to be an aging left-winger looking for new life was very heaven.

Dwight Macdonald was, after all these years, saying "Yes" again. "This is becoming our Peloponnesian War," he wrote about Vietnam. He was on the side of the draft-card burners, withheld a fourth of his own income taxes in protest against the war, bracketed Lyndon Johnson with Hitler and Stalin, wrote "I am ashamed to be an American." All cultural standards were out the window, as he praised his friend Mary McCarthy's pro-North Vietnam book (though he himself opposed siding with the Viet Cong, for reasons both moral and prudential) and Barbara Garson's play *MacBird,* which laid the blame for Kennedy's assassination on his vice-president. He attended a White House Festival of the Arts, boorishly asking other guests to sign a petition expressing dismay over the country's policies in Vietnam and the Dominican Republic. At the protest march at the Pentagon, he was disappointed not to have been arrested. A case, not uncommon on the bourgeois left during the 1960s, of pure subpoena envy.

"You must come up right away, Dwight," F. W. Dupee reported enthusiastically over the phone from Columbia University. "It's a revolution. You may never get another chance to see one." Here was Macdonald saying "Yes" again, more yeses this time out than Mrs. Leopold Bloom. He wrote a letter soliciting funds for the Students for a Democratic Society, and declared the Columbia ruckus "a beneficial disturbance." He was puffing on the good stuff—smoking, that is to say, pot—and dabbling with other drugs. At the New Haven trial of the Black Panther Bobby Seale, he showed up wearing two buttons: a pink one for gay rights and another with Eldridge Cleaver's political aperçu, "If you're not part of the solution you're part of the problem." Abbie Hoffman became part of his social set. Going, you might say, going, and gone:

> how sympathetic in general I am to the Young, they're the best generation I've known in this country, the cleverest and the most serious and decent (though I wish they'd READ a little—also I hate that obscenity bit, Up Against the Wall Motherfucker turns ME off, nor do I like—though must accept wryly—that "shit" has become an ordinary word of parliamentary discourse, nothing obscene or vulgar intended, they just use it the way we would say "nonsense.") [Well, not quite gone.]

In a very poor piece he wrote for *The New York Review of Books* attacking Tom Wolfe, he showed himself jealous of a younger writer who had swept the boards of all the kind of attention his own writing used to garner. His attack on Wolfe reads rather like an attack on himself. He mentions the books Wolfe had promised but failed to write. He claims that Wolfe's subjects are of only ephemeral interest and his writing won't last. He nails him for producing an anthology on the New Journalism: "Those who can, write; those who can't, anthologize." The irony of this remark is that the only book of Macdonald's that is likely to have a continuing life is *Parodies*, a brilliant anthology of the form he published in 1960.

According to his biographer, Macdonald died thinking himself a failure. Perhaps at

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the end each of us does, but Macdonald had the further goads in this direction supplied by drink and depression. (He was in psychotherapy for the last decade of his life.) Karl Kraus defined a journalist as "no ideas and the ability to express them." Not true of Macdonald, who could be said to have been sunburned by ideas. It's the quality of his ideas that is troublesome. How tired and thin, received and even rather coarse they now seem, beginning with the notion that being radical, which Macdonald liked to remind his readers means "goes to the root," suggested greater penetration than calmer, more centered thinking. While he rightly understood that his mind worked best when rubbing up against the particular and the concrete instance, he allowed lots of ideas—Trotskyism, anarchism, pacificism, even nudism—to violate him by destroying his common sense and balanced perspective.

Aesthetically, Macdonald's central idea seems to be that form and content were indivisible. Style and man, he liked to quote Buffon saying, they are one and the same. One understands the attraction of such a notion, the sweet symmetry of it, but adherence to it would force one to disqualify every bad writer in the history of thought, beginning with Immanuel Kant and running through at least John Dewey.

Another of Macdonald's core ideas was that the job of the intellectual was to keep up the critical pressure, especially on his own country, which, by definition, can never be good enough. The word *intellectual* was purely an honorific for Macdonald and with dissent understood to be the first priority of intellectuals. This of course neglects the possibility of the reflective intellectual, on the model of Tocqueville. Macdonald wanted terribly for intellectuals to matter in history, but seems to have failed to notice that whenever they have—during the French and Russian and (to lower the scale a bit) Cuban revolutions—it has always meant disaster.

Macdonald's other ideas were equally thin. He was big on community, that longstanding intellectual cliché and utopian abstraction, for which no vivid actual examples exist. A creative disorder man, he felt the country was in better shape when disturbance, and not order and harmony, was dominant. The status quo, for him, was always the enemy. When his friend Delmore Schwartz died, he recognized that there was a large self-destructive element in Schwartz—who had an overweening ambition combined with true mental illness—but that didn't stop Macdonald from making the hoary claim that America is not kind to its poets and that Schwartz was, somehow, a victim of mass society.

This same mass society had for a time greatly elevated Macdonald, and such was his fame that in the late 1950s serious people began comparing him to Mark Twain and H. L. Mencken. Writing to Ian Watt about this, Macdonald not immodestly claimed, "I've always been more tough-minded, less open to illusions than Mark was—and my laughter is not so bitter as his was, in his last phase." (There is also the fact that Mark Twain was a thwarted artist, and Macdonald a pure critic.) He disliked Mencken's style, but allowed that "like Mencken, I really enjoy being disappointed and outraged."

But one of the principal differences between Mencken and Macdonald, along with the former having had greater energy, more impressive intellectual production, and deeper influence upon his time, is that Mencken had a surer understanding of the reality of everyday life in America. More crucial, his scepticism was much greater. Nowhere was this scepticism greater than about ideas, for which Mencken had the greatest distrust. He was always blowing the whistle on con men—professors, would-be revolutionaries, and anyone else who claimed he had the answers to the impossible questions. Dwight Macdonald far more often blew the trumpet, welcoming their arrival. In a smalltime way, he was himself, unconsciously, even one of the con men. Poor guy, he just couldn't stop saying "Yes."

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Poems
by William Jay Smith, David R. Slavitt Chelsea Rathburn & Stephen Stepanchev

The hunt

Each vowel black and white with silver sound,
each consonant, a coil of golden fleece
that's hunted over russet-colored ground—
chorale by Bach and painting by Matisse—
this language, life . . . . Those hunting horns resound
so high up there you'd think they would release
the very sun itself the mountains round,
and penetrate deep valleys till they cease.

These words, this world; and all one sees and hears.
Think how, as if through time, the hunters ride
above the curling clouds while morning clears
and brings them breathless down the moutainside:
think how the dark divides to take their spears,
how in each poem life is justified.

—William Jay Smith

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Intruder

He broke in, picking the lock, or having stolen
a key, and he knew the code to disarm the alarm,

some homeless guy, a crazy street-person, harmless
you'd think, but you're wrong: he likes it here, and he stays.

He rummages through my closets and dresser drawers
and tries on my clothing, which happens, of course, to fit him.

He runs my comb through his hair. He uses my toothbrush.
He lies down on my side of the bed for a nap.

He has settled in. In the mornings, he sits at my place
and has his coffee and toast, reading my paper.

He borrows my car and drives to meet my classes;
during my office hours he meets with my students.

We don't look at all alike, but he's living my life.
I try to signal to friends with whom he dines

or my wife with whom he is sleeping: "This isn't me.
He's an imposter. How can you not have noticed?

He's old! He's nasty. Also, he's clearly crazy!
How can he fool you this way? And how can you stand him?"

They pay me no mind, pretending not to have noticed.
Could they somehow be in on this together?

But what is his purpose? Was he also displaced
from apartment, job, and wife? Did that turn him desperate?

And must I go out now myself to find a victim,
break into his house, and begin living his life?

—David R. Slavitt

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Letters from minor loves

Perhaps we thought their authors incomplete:
dimwitted, slightly dull, undignified.
They might have laughed too loud, appeared too sweet;
it's harder to be loved than vilified.

Whatever words became love's epitaph,
their lines still call to us from musty drawers.
The wounded stumble through each paragraph,
spilling flowers and wine and metaphors.

Their high-pitched voices squeal love's declarations,
singing praises that we've never earned,
and yet we keep these feeble accusations,
too beautiful, too clumsy to be burned.

—*Chelsea Rathburn*

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A Serb on a black mountain

Splitting, inarticulate rock:
Roots feeling out the silt in the cracks.
Stunted, arthritic trees thrash
The blue wind, which is pulling at twigs.

A maelstrom of white voices brews.
Ancestral voices woo. They ask me
To bare my neck and remember Tsar
Lazar and his bones. I bow my head.

A white fox tracks a brown dove
Fallen from a fir. It hits.
The bird rises to black claws
In a whir, a broken clap of wings.

It's a red spill, a shriek, in the snow.
The blood steams. Serbia dreams.

—*Stephen Stepanchev*

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London journal

Another painful lesson

by John Gross

You start thinking you can't be surprised anymore—not when it comes to left-wing opinion-makers, at least—but you end up being surprised nonetheless. Most of their reactions are predictable in broad outline; but reality has a way of going one better, or one worse.

Two days after the assault on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, BBC television broadcast that week's edition of the current affairs program "Question Time," a panel discussion with questions and comments from the floor. Almost at once it became clear that the audience contained a large contingent of Muslim extremists and left-wing sympathizers, who proceeded to hijack the program. Instead of questions, there were anti-American diatribes; members of the panel (who included a former American ambassador to Britain) were shouted down.

While what happened wasn't entirely inconsistent with the slant of recent BBC coverage in general, and its bias against Israel in particular, it is far more likely to have been the result of ineptitude. No one had bothered to check up on the audience. But that didn't make the incident any less ugly, and there were many protests.

For a day or two the BBC huffed and puffed. Then the Director General, Greg Dyke (of whom more later), issued an apology. It was fairly half-hearted, and one suspects it might not have been issued at all if offence hadn't been given at an ambassadorial level. Still, it was better than nothing.

Two days later, a headline in the London *Times* caught my eye: "Dyke strives to quell revolt over 'Question Time.'" For a moment, I felt mildly elated. So the old BBC spirit wasn't dead; there were still executives in the corporation capable of feeling ashamed of the previous week's lapse. Then I read on and saw what a fool I had been. There had indeed been "uproar" inside the BBC, as the *Times* explained. What had provoked it, however, had been not the program, but Dyke's apology: he had been obliged to send an e-mail to his staff, defending his decision.

It was a reminder that, while the world may have changed on September 11, the priorities of the media elite hadn't. But perhaps such a lesson was no longer needed, since by this stage left-wing interpretations of the current crisis had hardened and were being widely voiced. From the first, there had been mutterings that it was all America's fault. While the initial horrors were still unfolding, the *New Statesman* published an editorial in which it argued the need for moral distinctions: "American bond dealers, you may say, are as innocent and undeserving of terror as Vietnamese or Iraqi peasants. Well, yes and no." But it was left to the *Guardian* newspaper to play all the main anti-American tunes.

First we were told that while the atrocities of September 11 were a bad thing, their

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very horror was an index of how bitter the victims of American foreign policy felt, how much they had suffered. Then the grand old doctrine of equilateralism was wheeled out: the atrocities were a bad thing, but America had done equally bad things (and more of them). Then even the show of compassion was dropped, and we were told, repeatedly, that the Americans had had it coming to them. Before long, equilateralism began to be applied to the future as well as the past: there was talk of "an American jihad" and "Bush's holy war." At every stage, in fact, it was made clear that America's duty was to do nothing—except mend its ways. What it had been offered, if it only knew how to take advantage of it, was (immortal phrase) "a painful lesson." So the atrocities weren't such a bad thing after all.

Detailed instances of these approaches are hardly called for, but one observation by a *Guardian* writer has achieved enough popularity for it to deserve to be singled out: "a bully with a bloody nose is still a bully." And I can't resist quoting an example of the extremes to which another contributor to the paper was driven in the quest for equilateralist parallels:

> The smile on the face of the suicide bomber has as much to do with true humour and laughter as the rictus incantation "Have a nice day" in the supermarket checkout. Both are debased forms of totalitarianism.

The *Guardian* has been far from alone in promulgating such attitudes, and the smaller but influential *Independent* has run it a close second. To mark the replacement of the admittedly infelicitous name "Operation Infinite Justice" by "Operation Enduring Freedom," for instance, it published a cartoon showing a dwarfish Bush in conference with the chiefs of staff—thick-necked cigar-chomping brutes. Lying on the table around which they were sitting were crumpled scraps of paper with some of the other names for the campaign against terrorism which had been considered—"Operation Ubiquitous Cheeseburger," "Operation My-Dad's-Bigger-than-Your-Dad," "Operation Let's-Have-Us-a-Lynching."

All this needs to be set in perspective. Anything I write could, I suppose, be overtaken by events by the time this appears in print; but in the early weeks of the crisis, the most common British attitude towards America has been one of sympathy. Whatever other observations one might have about him, Tony Blair is undoubtedly America's staunchest ally among world leaders. The polls show—and not only the polls—that most of his countrymen agree with him. I have come across repeated expressions of dismay, concern, and support for "the war against terrorism" (though this isn't necessarily the term they would use) from ordinary people. My local firemen put a trestle table and a handwritten placard outside their station and started a collection "for the rescue workers in New York." Within ten days they had raised over £20,000—no small sum when it was only a question of passersby putting coins in a couple of boxes.

Most of the press have remained firmly in the pro-Western camp, too, including the *Times* and *The Daily Telegraph*, which between them have four times the circulation of the *Guardian*. But at this point one must sound a warning about numbers not being everything. The *Guardian* is also overwhelmingly the favored reading of people who work in education and the media, with all the indirect influence which that implies. If proof of its dominance were required, you need look no further than the fact that it enjoys a virtual monopoly among newspapers of advertisements for jobs in both fields. (Many teaching posts in Britain are advertised nationally.)

So the hard-left intelligentsia (and the lumpenintelligentsia) isn't just an irritant. It has to be taken seriously in straight political terms—which makes it all the more disconcerting that its reactions to the events of September 11 should have been so harsh, and so ideologically predetermined. You wonder what it would take for it to be will-

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ing to learn a "painful lesson" of its own. Sarin, anthrax, a nuclear warhead? On current form, it seems far from certain. Mustard gas, perhaps, but I shouldn't bank on it. Against some mindsets the gods themselves contend in vain.

For those of us who have deplored Blair's cultural "project" in all its phases, from "Cool Britannia" to "inclusiveness," there is a dilemma. Not only is he right about terrorism, which is a more important issue than culture, he is also likely to come under increasing attack from opponents of the American alliance within his own party (of whom there are a great many). Under the circumstances, one would prefer to call a cultural truce. Yet while we were all still reeling from the atrocities, an important cultural piece of the Blairite jigsaw was being put smoothly in place. The government appointed a new chairman of the BBC; he turned out, to nobody's great surprise, to be Gavyn Davies, an influential Labour advisor and contributor to party funds. (His wife, for good measure, is political secretary to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown.)

Not so long ago, a blatantly political appointment of this kind would have been hard to get away with. What makes it even more questionable is that Greg Dyke, who is already installed as the BBC's director general (in effect its CEO), is another lavish contributor to the Labour party and to Blair's personal election fund. Both men at the top of the corporation are now "Tony's cronies."

That doesn't mean the Davies-Dyke BBC will slavishly carry out the government's orders. On the contrary, individual programmakers may yet ensure that it is a major source of opposition to some of Blair's policies, especially his commitment to the war against terrorism. But at least it can be said that Davies's appointment is unlikely to do anything to redress the BBC's domestic bias against the Conservatives—a bias that everyone recognizes, though not everyone admits.

As for Greg Dyke, his tenure so far has been chiefly marked by political correctness (or gestures towards it), increasing coarseness (in the name of populism), and a general lowering of standards (though by no means a comprehensive one—the BBC is a big place). His most memorable statement is probably his comment, made during the course of a broadcast, that the BBC is "hideously white." Among the minor milestones of his regime, one of the more revealing is the description of Churchill that appeared in a program note in the BBC magazine *Radio Times*: "History may regard Winston Churchill as the architect of the disastrous Gallipoli campaign, or the maker of xenophobic speeches, but tonight we consider him in philanthropic old age."

Meanwhile, the general evolution (or erosion) of British culture continues along lines that are by now well laid out. I close with three recent news items to reassure readers that, in spite of everything, the process goes on.

- After long resisting the idea of naming airports after individuals—no JFK, no Charles de Gaulle—we have at last succumbed. Liverpool Airport has been renamed Liverpool John Lennon Airport.

- One of the posters in a new Church of England advertising campaign carries the message: "Body piercing? Jesus had his done 2000 years ago."

- The *Guardian*, a great source of artistic news as well as political guidance, reports that one of the current interests of the artists Gilbert and George is pubic lice. With any luck it is an interest that they will soon incorporate into their art, and we'll have another treat to look forward to.

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Theater

In the wake

by Mark Steyn

A decade ago, Louis Benjamin, then the head of Stoll Moss, London's largest theatre owners, showed me the graphs for West End ticket sales and pointed out the clutched straws with which each dip in receipts was rationalized: "Libyan crisis," "Royal wedding," "Weather v. bad," "Weather v. good." "We've got an awful lot of excuses," he said.

> But it's all rubbish. It's like the old excuse when takings were down at the Finsbury Empire [a raucous music hall]: "Polo at Hurlingham." I took 300,000 pounds at the Palladium last week. D'you think I care what the bloody weather was like?

This was 1991, Gulf War time, when Saddam Hussein, despite being preoccupied with brutalizing Kuwait and fending off the Great Satan, had apparently found time to close two West End musicals, *Children of Eden* and *Matador*. I'm all for blaming Saddam as much as possible, but, in fairness to the old mass murderer, most of *Children of Eden*'s and *Matador*'s wounds were self-inflicted. On balance, Saddam's invasion of Kuwait was probably marginally good for business, if only because the potential theatergoing population was significantly increased by the vast number of al-Sabah princes who fled to London for the duration.

But ten years later Osama bin Laden seems to be doing a pretty thorough job on the Grim White Way (as it's now called). By some estimates, 75 percent of New York theater business is from tourists, and tourists are in short supply right now. In the suicide bombers of al-Qaeda, even Andrew Lloyd Webber may have met his match: you can now get two on the aisle for *Phantom* any night you want. Five other shows closed immediately, most of the rest took big pay cuts, and the Roundabout Theatre Company cancelled its opening this month of Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman's 1991 collaboration *Assassins*. This is a "revue" about the various men and women who've tried to kill American presidents, from Lincoln to Reagan. Sondheim and Weidman are nothing if not protective of their cult status, and ten years ago took the precaution of opening it during the Gulf War. You can sense the theater's reluctance to give up on it this time around. "An experience like this makes me want to produce it more than ever," said Todd Haimes, Artistic Director of the Roundabout. And you can see why: the revue's evocation of the assassination of President McKinley by the anarchist Leon Czolgosz exactly a century ago certainly has topical resonances.

Anarchists were very much the international terrorists of the day. But Sondheim and Weidman have nothing to say about their presidential assassins other than that they're not "misfits" but all too typical Americans claiming their right to pursue their own somewhat darker version of hap-

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piness. To that end, the authors take all the most "innocent" musical forms—the beloved nineteenth-century American songbook of cakewalks and Stephen Foster ballads—and gleefully transform them into a soundtrack for psychopaths. To kill a president, says the show, is the quintessential American dream. This would have been just another of the theater's faux provocations before September 11, and no doubt soon enough its time will come again.

Right now, though, it provides an insight into why the theater provides so few insights. Many of the most idiotic reflex reactions to September 11 came from show people, from John Lahr, Harold Pinter, Dario Fo, as predictably perverse, paranoid, and troglodyte as ever. All the really stupid things are said by all the really clever people: you'll search long and hard to find a grease-monkey who's offered up anything as dumb as some of the apparently widely held beliefs of Ivy League professors. On stage, in the weeks after September 11, a similar rough 'n' ready rule held: it was possible to return to *The Music Man*, a revival whose hokiness I'd originally found as slick and insincere as the principal character, and find that somehow the show's fundamental harmlessness had combined with the audience's goodwill to produce a weirdly moving testament to the transcendent optimism of America. But the following night I went to the Pearl Theatre Company's revival of the 1962 play *Exit The King*, Ionesco's celebrated meditation on the inevitability of death, the loneliness of life, and the usefulness of death as a prism through which to understand life. The protagonist is, as usual, Ionesco's alter-ego Bérenger, better known from the earlier work *Rhinoceros*, but here elevated to King Bérenger I, an aged buffoon of a monarch presiding over a crumbling realm. At the opening of the play, his first wife, Queen Marguerite, tells him, "You're going to die at the end of the show."

The king is reluctant to "deal with" this precise death sentence. He insists his remorseless paralysis is lumbago, he fudges, obfuscates, plays for time, weeps, rages, and demands to know, "Why was I born if it wasn't forever?"

And answer comes there none, which is the point. Ionesco is one of the colossi of the Theater of the Absurd, whose basic thesis is that man lives in isolation, an isolation so profound that he cannot even acknowledge it because it renders meaningful communication impossible, and thus makes meaningless life itself. Futility is all. Pointlessness is the point. That the depressive dramatist sincerely believed this and could not have foreseen the bizarre context in which this first New York revival would be played doesn't compensate for the fact that the forced comic nihilism just seems terribly silly. Not offensive, but wrong. It's like *King Lear* without the insight into human nature and played as a vaudeville sketch. Joseph Hardy's production manages to make a dated fraudulent irrelevance even more tiresome by ignoring the Absurdism and playing it with a leaden earnestness. The company seems to have been selected principally for its tin ear for comedy, with Robert Hock as the king compensating with a lot of generic shuffling and shambling, and everyone around him belaboring even the most whimsical line. Hardy's careless decision to conjure the royal court in contemporary fashion—the servant girl wears jeans, the throne is an office chair—only adds to the gloom: remote, exotic figures talking twaddle about life and death is one thing, but folks who look like New York office workers doing so is quite another.

As the evening grinds on, the lack of laughs becomes embarrassing, beaching the actors and exposing the play as a morbid indulgence written by someone whose obsession with his own anxieties was at the price of any sense of anybody else's. It may be that almost all writers write because of a fear of mortality, but they don't all write *about* the fear of mortality. The fleetingness of life is one of those things most of us adjust to. Recalling walking with his mother among the winter crowds at the Place de Vaugirard, Ionesco said, "Whenever the

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picture of this street lives again in my memory, and when I consider that today almost all of these people are dead, everything strikes me as indeed shadow and evanescence. I am seized with dizziness, with anguish. There, in effect, goes the world: a desert of dying shadows." But, when just a short walk from this theater in St. Mark's Place, you're confronted by a real desert of shadows, shadows of thousands of evaporated lives, Ionesco's weary nihilism seems absurd rather than Absurd, a revelation of his disconnection from humanity rather than his understanding of it.

I've written before about the role of the audience—the way, say, Caryl Churchill's West End hit *Serious Money* was a savage indictment of Eighties greed when played before season-ticket lefties at the Royal Court but a raucous night out when played before City bond traders. That's what's happened across town since September 11: the plays are the same, but the audience isn't. As a rule, the more amiably escapist the fare the more resilient it is. But even evenings with the lightest touch go oddly awry: *Rude Entertainment* (at the Greenwich House Theatre) is a gay cornucopia by Paul Rudnick, a prolific author who occasionally hits the big time, as he did a couple of years back with the Kevin Kline film *In and Out*. Mr Rudnick is a youngish fellow but as a "gay writer" somewhat old school, happier with Barbra Streisand gags than with the dreary preoccupations of the politicized gay left. His *Rude Entertainment* is a trio of playlets whisked through in a brisk ninety minutes that is best seen as a response to recent shifts in the gay sensibility.

The first offering, *Mr. Charles, Currently of Palm Beach*, is a cheerful throwback to the days when homosexuality was one of those things that was, in Lorenz Hart's words, "Too Good for the Average Man." Mr. Charles, an exquisitely plumed and gilded gay stereotype of a certain age, resplendent from his aubergine espadrilles to his blonde rug, sits on a throne far more impressive than anything in King Bérenger's court. He is the host of a cable show called *Too Gay*, which can be seen on Channel 47 every other Thursday at 4 A.M., between *Adult Interludes* and *Stretching With Sylvia*. Mr. Charles has what he describes as "nelly breaks," bursts of flaming queenery, when he starts babbling in the hysterical gay dialect he calls Shebonics, and is assisted by his tank-topped "ward" Shane ("Danke, Shane"). But what he mainly does on his show is read viewers' letters: "What causes homosexuality? I do." It's undemanding fare, extravagantly shallow and intentionally constrained by its television format, but rendered very enjoyable by Peter Bartlett's absolutely fagulous turn as Mr. Charles. At its best, it's an elegy for a disappearing world. Aware that he is a gay dinosaur, a tyrannosaura regina, he lets rip in a late "nelly break" about contemporary gayness and its need to prove that "we can hold jobs, go to church, raise children, just like everyone else." What's the point of that? "Being gay," he sighs amid a blizzard of farewell kisses, "there's a romance!"

Very Special Needs, the second playlet, brings us up to the minute with Timmy, a menswear designer, and his partner Trent, desperate to have a child. "It's all I've been dreaming about!," says Timmy. "I mean, all our friends, almost every gay couple, they all have babies!" Rudnick seems to sense the ice is a little thinner here, and the jokes get more tangential, like a variety-show sketch trying to avoid confronting its subject. Real life is wackier even than Rudnick's quickfire gag machine: the other day, a court in British Columbia ruled that a lesbian couple was entitled to be identified as mother and father on their child's birth certificate. The registrar had offered to list both women as mothers and either leave the name of father blank or insert the sperm donor, which would appear to be closer to the biological realities, but the court effectively ruled that it was discriminatory of the province to restrict terms such as "mother" and "father" to the outmoded models of the heterosexual family and that they should henceforth be self-selecting categories. Any play that really

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took on this subject would perforce be somewhat pointed, and the good-natured Rudnick is happy just to riff on the idea of children as the latest gay fashion accessory. Christopher Ashley's staging of this middle section suggests he knows all too well that it doesn't really stand up.

And then comes Rudnick's finale: *On the Fence*. Yes, Matthew Shepard, again. Unlike previous documentary reconstructions of the events leading to his murder in Wyoming, Matthew (Neal Huff) this time is caught in a limbo between life and death, where his only companions are a gay saint, Eleanor Roosevelt (Harriet Harris), and a gay devil, Paul Lynde (Bartlett again), the flamboyant favorite of *Hollywood Squares* restored to life clad in a caftan and armed with a cocktail. Rudnick, hitherto happy to bounce from queeny quip to queeny quip, is suddenly in the mood for a thoughtful debate on gay iconography. But who, honestly, needs such a debate? The reason why there are so many plays and television movies about Matthew Shepard is that what happened to him three years ago is so rare: he's a posterchild for an epidemic that doesn't exist. In a country of a quarter-billion people, one vile gay-bashing is enough to prompt a summer-long torrent of media anguish about the "climate of hate," just as in the wake of September 11 a few dozen intemperate anti-Muslim incidents threatened to do the same. But thousands and thousands of people died on September 11 and none of them will ever be as famous as "Matthew." The endless pages of dead firemen alone are so numerous that it's all but impossible to stop and focus on the human interest. To offer yet another fetishistic wallow in Matthew Shepard in the shadow of a huge mound of anonymous corpses suggests a culture whose deranged self-absorption in the peripheral is irredeemable.

Rudnick, I suspect, knows this. The climax of *On the Fence* is a coup de théâtre so lurid and unjustified that most theatergoers on the night I went charitably assumed it had been written before the big event. But it seems to me more likely that it's a hasty, misguided but intentional response to September 11. And so Matthew, Paul, and Eleanor turn their guns on the audience and shoot us at random.

The moral of the story? "Maybe the world is divided into two groups," says Paul Lynde. "The people who can kill other people. And the people who only wish they could." Maybe. But I think it's more likely the world is divided into the people who've entirely forgotten Paul Lynde, if they were ever aware of him, and the people who are reluctant to accept pat little homilies on the world's woes from a sour showbiz loser. But Lynde isn't done yet. "Perhaps," he says, "the most that anyone can hope for is to want to be good."

The antidote to such a shriveled moral is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, adapted and directed by Mary Zimmerman as a shimmering storybook production at the Second Stage. The evening is a literal oasis from the outside world, its various tales played out on a simple set centered around a shallow twenty-seven-foot pool of water. There are times when Miss Zimmerman teeters on a bad case of the cutes and when her actors get as sappy as the script, but these are momentary lapses. The production is suffused in loss conjured in the simplest of images—like a picture book you remember from childhood but didn't fully understand at the time.

So, for example, we meet Alcyon, who stands at water's edge waiting for the ship of her long-dead husband Erysichthon to reappear on the horizon. One day she finds his body in the ocean, and she embraces him, and, as she does so, they rise from the water, reborn as seabirds. It is a memorable stage picture, but also more than that: a vision of love transcending death that seems truer than anything in Ionesco.

Perhaps the signature image of the production is Orpheus, who in variation after variation of the famous myth is forced to relive again and again his famous, fatal error, like a man trapped in memory—as he

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looks back at his beloved and she vanishes forever into the underworld. No one needs to labor any parallels: in Alcyon and Orpheus and the story of Baucis and Philemon, who pray only that they will not die apart, our own sorrows find eloquent expression. It's not that the characters articulate grief, so much as capture it—in a glance, a sigh, the sense of sudden eternal wonder. This would not be possible without a fine company, especially Erik Lochtefeld as Orpheus, Heidi Stillman as Eurydice, Chris Kipiniak as Erysichthon and Louise Lamson as Alcyon. The metamorphosis is in our ability to find the consolations in pain. The final tale concludes with a candlelight vigil, whispers in the darkness in the face of death. Many of those around me had tears streaming down their faces. Miss Zimmerman did not intend any topical resonances, and other moments waft free of overtones—Phaeton, son of the Sun, lying on a floating mattress and fuming over his dad as if in a therapy session. But *Metamorphoses* speaks from the ancient world to ours even as *On the Fence* and *Exit the King* seem trapped in an age now dead and gone.

Perhaps it's no surprise that the most eloquent comment on our changed world should depend very little on words. The clever guys' stuff about the World Trade Center has been almost embarrassingly inert, the kind of bad "good writing" whose self-regarding fussiness makes subject matter irrelevant. Think John Updike in *The New Yorker* preening his subordinate clauses, "smoke speckled with bits of paper curled into the cloudless sky, and strange inky rivulets ran down the giant structure's vertically corrugated surface. It fell straight down like an elevator, with a tinkling shiver and a groan of concussion distinct across the mile of air. An empty spot had appeared, as if by electronic command," etc. Oh, for a monosyllabic tab hack! The ghastly false tinkle of all those shivers and groans and curling rivulets is a reminder that for the most part our great artists don't illuminate the human condition so much as offer an insulated retreat from it.

Venturing back to the theater a few days after September 11, I decided to treat myself to some happy musical revivals and found myself dreading the moment at the curtain when the designated spokesperson would step forward from the company and offer a few words. I dreaded not so much moral equivalence or Pinteresque bloviating but the life-sapping pieties of some dimestore Oprah. Yet I underestimated Broadway's luvvies. In most cases they contented themselves with a few words in memory of the dead, before the orchestra struck up "God Bless America"—written as a theater song but currently more popular than the national anthem. "God bless America/ Land that I love," wrote Irving Berlin, who was untroubled by the self-loathing that afflicts so many theatrical luminaries. "God Bless America" has everything—uncomplicated patriotism, something about the topography, a call for divine protection, an implied martial beat, and the confidence to set the climactic high note of the tune to the word "God." As a national song, it's ingeniously, unobtrusively comprehensive—a testament to the American theater's ability, every once in a while, to rise gloriously to the occasion.

Editor's note: We wish to call our readers' attention to the publication of *Dreamers of Dreams: Essays on Poets and Poetry*, by John Simon (Ivan R. Dee, $26), portions of which first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

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Art

Eilshemius rediscovered again

by Karen Wilkin

For sheer peculiarity, the exhibition "Louis M. Eilshemius: An Independent Spirit" at the National Academy of Design, will probably set a standard for a long time to come.[1] Eilshemius is one of the oddest of American painters, a genuinely obscure, hard-to-classify figure known mainly for a few works but admired by a handful of aficionados, periodically "discovered," and then relegated to a footnote in the history of New York painting. For once the dreadful word "marginalized" is appropriate.

Every aspect of Eilshemius's life and art embodies contradiction. Even though his best known pictures could easily be mistaken for the work of a passionate, slightly ham-handed amateur doing the best he can, their author was, in fact, a sophisticated, well-educated, well-travelled, traditionally trained painter capable of drawing with academic correctness. While he apparently saw himself as unfairly overlooked by the art establishment, for much of his later life Eilshemius was highly regarded by a coterie of vanguard artists, dealers, and collectors. He produced no pictures during the last two decades of his life, but, up until then, he was an immensely prolific artist and, among other things, a voluble writer. Though he was born to an affluent family, able to live comfortably on inherited money until his last years, he died a pauper.

Knowing something about Eilshemius's background makes it no easier to decide whether we should regard him as a visionary poet or as a crank with aspirations towards a kind of idiosyncratic realism, as a true original or as someone who achieved a type of originality in spite of himself. Either way, his pictures, from his curiously stilted landscapes bathed in amber light to his inexplicable narratives enacted by stiffly drawn figures, remain as puzzling as ever, in part because they seem at once surprisingly fresh and completely out of step with their time. Born in 1864, Eilshemius was only five years older than Matisse; still, he appears to have been untouched by modernist notions, preferring to give himself up entirely to the certainties and idealism of the nineteenth-century sublime. But this didn't stop the avant garde from championing him. He was first singled out for praise by Marcel Duchamp and later collected and admired by modernism's staunchest supporters, rather in the way that Henri Rousseau—another intensely earnest oddball with amazing pictorial gifts and ambitions—was championed by his European colleagues. Lingering doubt remains, however, as to whether the notoriously provocative Duchamp was serious when he declared his enthusiasm for Eilshemius's submission to

1 "Louis M. Eilshemius: An Independent Spirit" opened at the National Academy of Design, New York on September 19 and remains on view until December 30, 2001. A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by Steven Harvey, has been published by the National Academy of Design (64 pages, $30).

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"The Independents Exhibition" of 1917: a rather lumpish nude, gesturing histrionically, rather like a Bouguereau gone horribly wrong. Official opinion now holds that while Duchamp may have originally intended a cruel joke, he came to admire Eilshemius deeply, although he was convinced that his "discovery" was an authentic, unschooled naïf—an American Rousseau, in fact. (Duchamp would have been closer to the mark if he'd thought about his protégé as an American William Blake, but that's another matter.) In hindsight, it's easy to see what Duchamp might have responded to in Eilshemius's fantastic, almost cartoon-like nudes. Duchamp's own peepshow of a splayed nude now installed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art perhaps offers a hint.

If Duchamp's original motive in praising Eilshemius remains cloudy, there is no doubt that, later on, a diverse group of artists—ranging from Leland Bell and Louise Bourgeois to Paul Georges and Paul Resika—was wholehearted in its admiration for the enigmatic American's work. There is, alas, no doubt either that Eilshemius's life was genuinely tragic. He was a troubled, lonely, and unhappy man, probably a victim of manic depression, given to hyperbolic self-promotion and crackpot projects. He was bitterly disappointed by the world's failure to take him at his own evaluation as the "Mightiest Man and Wonder of the Worlds" as painter, poet, composer, author, and master (according to an over-sized, self-aggrandizing business-card worthy of P. T. Barnum) of "all the ologies." Eilshemius's last years were particularly dismal. A traffic accident in 1932 severely incapacitated him, and he lived in grinding poverty, more or less housebound in a steadily deteriorating family home on East 57th Street. From there he was taken in 1941 to die at Bellevue. By this time, he had not painted for two decades, perhaps because of his emotional instability, perhaps because he was defeated by lack of attention to his work.

Or was he? The cofounder of the pioneering Société Anonyme, Katherine Dreier, following the lead of her colleague Duchamp, awarded Eilshemius two one-man shows, in 1920 and in 1924. The influential art critic Henry McBride, although not initially a fan, soon joined the ranks of the painter's supporters. Duncan Phillips bought Eilshemius's work for his new museum of modern art in Washington. The statistics are impressive: between 1932 and his death in 1941, Eilshemius had no fewer than twenty-five solo shows. A sympathetic biography of the artist, moreover, was published in 1939. That same year, Eilshemius was included in the Museum of Modern Art's sweeping international survey "Art in Our Time," organized to celebrate the youthful institution's tenth anniversary and the opening of its new building on 53rd Street. (He was represented by a pleasant 1915 genre scene of a performance at the Plaza Theater, apparently inspired by Impressionist paintings of spectacle and spectators. It's worth noting that he is described—not with any degree of accuracy—as having studied with Kenyon Cox in New York in 1882 and with Bouguereau in Paris in 1888.) In his later years, younger figurative artists, including the Soyer brothers and David Burliuk, were fascinated by Eilshemius and apparently kept in touch with him. Burliuk painted an affectionate image of the impressively bearded Eilshemius on his deathbed, attended by a voluptuous red-haired muse. Milton Avery rendered a sympathetic, but incisive posthumous portrait. As Paul J. Karlstrom, the author of the definitive work on Eilshemius, noted, this is "hardly the profile of an unsuccessful artist." None of it seems to have made any difference to Eilshemius.

Touching as Eilshemius's history may be, it is, of course, on his work that he ultimately must be judged, rather than on the anecdotes about his life, no matter how poignant. It has not, however, been easy to evaluate Eilshemius's worth as an artist, since for decades there have been few opportunities to see his paintings in any depth. Viewing reproductions of his work has also been difficult, since even comprehensive publications award him little but token

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coverage. Such works most often discuss his oeuvre in relation to the visionary paintings of Arthur B. Davies, illustrating their points with the Museum of Modern Art's strange little Eilshemius from 1899, *Afternoon Wind*. This cluster of pale little nudes improbably elevated above a rocky landscape—reclining on the air, it seems, rather than floating—is a picture that for many of us, I suspect, represents the first image that comes to mind at the mention of Eilshemius's name. Even Karlstrom's 1978 monograph, while ambitious and far-reaching, isn't much help; the illustrations are extensive but horribly muddy. (Despite the mud, Eilshemius's pictures frequently look better in illustrations than in actuality, since their often infelicitous surfaces are homogenized and clarified by reproduction.)

This fall, sixty years after the artist's death, this all may change. Eilshemius's name could begin to conjure up new images, thanks to "An Independent Spirit" at the National Academy of Design, and a concurrent show, "Louis Eilshemius . . . Imagine That!" at Gallery Gertrude Stein.[2] Together, the two shows survey the full range of Eilshemius's efforts, from carefully observed drawings to wholly invented paintings.

Yet here, too, we encounter another contradiction. Knowing more about Eilshemius's work is a mixed blessing. He was not only a notably productive painter, but also a wildly (willfully?) uneven one. The show at the National Academy of Design has obviously been thoughtfully chosen to underscore Eilshemius's strengths, but it's clear that he didn't reach the maximum intensity of what Helen Frankenthaler calls the emotional "frequency" of his most compelling works with any consistency. MOMA's frequently reproduced *Afternoon Wind*, in fact, turns out to be one of his best paintings.

Which is not to say that the show isn't full of surprises, including examples of early (and sometimes not so early) work that, far from illuminating the artist's evolution, make his better known landscapes and narrative scenes appear more mysterious than ever. Armed with the knowledge that Eilshemius studied in Paris at the Académie Julian, for example, one might be tempted to think that a series of "nocturnes" of New York City streetscapes must be typical of his early work, when he was still interested in responding to the perceivable world instead of inventing imaginary "soul" images, as he called them. Then we notice that the cityscapes date from about 1909—ten years *after* Eilshemius painted the visionary *Afternoon Wind* and almost ten years after the rather lurid, imaginary drama *American Tragedy: Revenge* (c. 1901, Hirshhorn Museum, Washington). The longer we spend with the "nocturnes," in fact, the more they start to fray; they begin to make us think less about perceptual realism and more about James McNeill Whistler. As a result, they lose their initial semblance of straightforwardness and become surprisingly moody and evocative. Yet, at the same time, the apparently anomalous sequence of dates compels us to ponder the idyllic *Afternoon Wind*, with its reclining nudes, not only as a glimpse of a private fantasy, but also as a response to the idealized classical world of Puvis de Chavannes.

A small group of even earlier landscapes of the Delaware Water Gap—c. 1896—present us with another Eilshemius, a fairly accomplished, not very adventurous recorder of the visible, filtered through the most predictable of academic precepts. (Not surprisingly, these were, pre-Duchamp, his most accepted and admired works.) A series of sturdy nudes in landscapes ranging from the tropical to the generic, painted about 1906–07, in turn presents us with yet another of Eilshemius's painterly personae. These echoes of a 1901 trip to the South Pacific are based on watercolors and drawings the painter made during a sojourn in Samoa and on photographs of nubile young Polynesian women. Corot's moonlit nudes are somehow implied, but Eilshemius's South Seas

2 "Louis Eilshemius . . . Imagine That!" opened at Gallery Gertrude Stein, New York on September 19 and remains on view until December 30, 2001.

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maidens seem drained of color; his scenes of the tropics are totally devoid of any sense of the brilliant southern light. Yet the series both enlarges our understanding of Eilshemius's aims and aspirations and suggests new readings of the origins of his uncanny paintings of nymphs dancing in midair.

The biggest surprise of the show was probably the revelation of an unexpected link between Balthus and Eilshemius. The likeness between many of Balthus's images of provocatively rigid young girls and Eilshemius's stiff portrait of a young pianist, *The Prodigy* (1917, private collection) proves to be the result of a direct encounter. A recently published biography documents that in 1930, as a young painter, Balthus accompanied his mother and brother on a visit to Henri-Pierre Roché, a friend of Duchamp whose collection included several works by "the American Rousseau," including *The Prodigy*. Balthus and his family apparently "expressed their interest" in Eilshemius's pictures. There's even some indication that Mme. Klossowska intended, but failed, to buy *The Prodigy* for her son. What's certain is that as a result of viewing this painting Balthus's work changed significantly, featuring the characteristics and subject matter for which it later became known—the wrenched poses, the frozen drawing, the brown palette, the dry surfaces, and, above all, the young girls. This connection provokes questions about yet another "Balthusian" Eilshemius in the National Academy's exhibition, *Interior with Standing Nude* (c. 1915, Robert K. Fitzgerel Collection). Here the earthy brown, red, and gold colors, the strange amalgam of the specific and the vague, the airless space, and the figure caught in a gesture of complete irrelevance, seem to point as much to the "King of Cats" as to Eilshemius's own inventions. Was this one of Roché's pictures? The catalogue's provenance is unrevealing.

Apart from the Balthus connection, the catalogue and exhibition texts place the greatest emphasis on Eilshemius's links with Corot, a painter whom he seems to have admired without emulating very directly, whether out of choice or lack of ability. We catch glimpses of a kind of homage to Corot in Eilshemius's selection of subject and (more rarely) in his way of putting a picture together, but the differences between the two artists overwhelm any such slight similarities. Eilshemius's touch is niggling where Corot's is generous. The former's palette is murky and subdued, recalling the "soups and gravies" of mid-nineteenth-century academic painting—notably the School of Düsseldorf. The latter demonstrates an acute sensitivity to tonality and nuances of light. Eilshemius's woods and streams call to mind Courbet's rocky outcrops and pools more than the crisp, light-struck campagna of Corot's Italian landscapes, or the silvery, humid ponds and thickets of his later visions of the Ile-de-France.

In the end, however, Eilshemius's relation to his better-known ancestors seems irrelevant, which is probably why Duchamp believed he was a naïf in the first place. He appears to have departed from a rather standard, generalized notion of "Art" in the strictest traditional terms. Even the most startling of Eilshemius's pictures seems rooted in utterly conventional assumptions about the way space and form ought to be rendered, about the way the medium must be dissembled in order to create an illusion. None of the quirks of even Eilshemius's most arresting—and quirkiest—pictures seems to have anything to do with modernist notions of the reinvention of form. Instead, they appear to be the result of failed attempts at verisimilitude or allusiveness. Gestures seem meaningless, arbitrary rather than merely rhetorical. The exhibition at Gallery Gertrude Stein includes, for example, some of Eilshemius's pictures inspired by World War I (a series absent from the Academy of Design's selection), which can easily be mistaken for cowboy scenes. The show also includes a truly impenetrable, carefully rendered tableau of a woman jumping decorously off a cliff into the sea. Even the fictive "golden" frames that Eilshemius painted on his canvases—and was

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proud of having invented—read as efforts to replicate the conventions of haut-bourgeois interior embellishments of the fin-de-siècle. Of course, they also read as acts of painterly desperation. Since Eilshemius often seems to lose his impetus at the edges of his pictures, these interior frames solve the problem of what to do in the corners, which does not diminish their potent associations with upper-middle class gentility in the late nineteenth century.

What saves even the most inept of Eilshemius's efforts is its sense of absolute conviction. He seems simultaneously to be illustrating and inhabiting inchoate fantasies, depictions of ardently desired idylls that oddly (and sadly) remain unfulfilled. Eilshemius's images seem at once charged and sanitized, his narratives both feverish and unintelligible. It's almost impossible to figure out just what is going on. None of the drownings, suicides, or war pictures quite makes sense as illustrations; none of the hovering nymphs or their earthbound sisters is an unequivocal denizen of an ideal world. It's all a little uncomfortable, but that sense of unease is what keeps us coming back and, ultimately, what makes Eilshemius's work memorable: the ambiguity, the nutty intensity, the sheer *contrariness* of it all.

If Eilshemius's work is strange, the elegantly produced catalogue that accompanies "An Independent Spirit" is stranger still. One essay, by the painter Steven Harvey, the show's guest curator, is a useful résumé of Eilshemius's history and a discussion of the way in which he has been regarded at various moments since his "discovery" by Duchamp. The second essay, by Paul Karlstrom, is a very curious document indeed, essentially a repudiation of his 1978 monograph on the painter. He claims that in the past he was misled by the pervasive (and apparently noxious) influence of Clement Greenberg's formalist approach into writing about Eilshemius as a kind of "proto-abstract expressionist" whose simplifications were driven by a notion of "expressive modernist progress." Today, Karlstrom avows that he has seen the light. He would have done better, he says, to have considered Eilshemius in terms of "the male gaze" as revealed by feminist studies of sexuality in painting, or some such thing. (How *anyone* could see Eilshemius's works as modernist in any way or make them yield sustained interest in terms of formal analysis is indeed an absorbing question—but why blame Greenberg for one's lack of acuity?) To his credit, Karlstrom's discussion of shifting perceptions of Eilshemius is clear and informative, although he generally avoids the issue of why current taste should find deeply felt narratives, largely devoid of formal rigor, such as Eilshemius's, more acceptable than they were when the 1978 monograph was published. That Duchamp's mistrust of what he called "optical" art has come to dominate the current art world remains essentially unaddressed in Karlstrom's essay. The catalogue also reprints Eilshemius's "An Informal Talk," a rambling discourse on aesthetics delivered at the Société Anonyme in 1920, along with some useful information on the provenance and exhibition history of the exhibited works. But since it is only minimally illustrated and poorly organized, it is a most inadequate document of an important show.

I doubt that even the most partisan will emerge from the exhibitions at the National Academy of Design and Gallery Gertrude Stein convinced that Eilshemius is an overlooked giant of American painting. For ferocity, originality, formal inventiveness, and even for crankiness, he doesn't come anywhere close to, say, Marsden Hartley. But Eilshemius richly deserves to be considered within the context of his peers, as he was in that MOMA anniversary show of 1939. He rewards attention, even if all his work accomplishes is to make us think about the untidiness and multiplicity of what the sculptor Anthony Caro calls "the onward of art."

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Gallery chronicle

by Daniel Kunitz

A month ago in these pages I fretted over how contemporary audiences and artists might respond to the fervent seriousness embodied in Clyfford Still's paintings. Animated by irony, allusiveness, and free-floating cosmopolitanism, our governing sensibility was, I suggested, devoid of the solemnity of purpose that carried cultural weight in the decade and a half after World War II, when Still reached the height of his powers. All that has changed. What the mood and tastes of the country will be in the coming years is anybody's guess. What can be said is that art made before September 11, 2001, does not today look the same as it did before that date: amidst confusion, fear, and uncertainty, no overarching sensibility prevails. Whatever merits the cultural context imparted to recent works of art are now withheld, and, due to this, we might regard art from a certain distance, but we might also look with fresh eyes now that the slate has been so shockingly cleared.

Few photographers of the last ten years have been more influential than Philip-Lorca diCorcia, though, typical of the times, that influence was seen primarily in fashion spreads, advertising images, and editorial photographs—far less so than in fine art photography. Indeed, diCorcia has helped spread his particular style of image-making beyond purely artistic precincts: like many photographers going back to Steichen, he divides his time between commercial and gallery-oriented work, often cribbing from the latter to give brand-name appeal to his for-hire efforts. In earlier non-commercial work, the fifty-year-old diCorcia, who studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and at Yale's graduate school, captured street scenes teeming with crowds. His latest show, "Heads," at PaceWildenstein's recently opened Chelsea gallery, offered thirteen black-framed 48 x 60 inch color photographs that focus on single passersby isolated from throngs and their urban surroundings by means of a strobe light and a telephoto lens.[1] The complex lighting effects illuminated some of the heads from total blackness, as if the subjects were standing in front of a black backdrop; in some images multiple heads appear, and blurry buildings or lights arise out of the blackness. Because he catches them unaware, diCorcia's subjects tend to seem inwardly directed, absorbed in thought. A halo limns the edges of an adolescent boy in a dark, hooded sweatshirt and Yankees cap; a balding, suited man in aviator sunglasses sternly confronts the viewer with an infectious-looking sore on his lip; the concerned, or weary, expression of a pudgy postal worker is emphasized by the thick, dark lines of shadows cast by his eyeglasses; and a baggy-eyed security officer stares sadly

1 "Philip-Lorca diCorcia: Heads" was on view at PaceWildenstein, New York, from September 6 to October 13, 2001.

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down at the pavement—cipher-like, such images invite the viewer to complete them with narratives. And, just weeks after the World Trade Center attacks some two miles south of the gallery, those narratives inevitably reflect current events, making them seem especially timely, particularly, though not exclusively, those photographs of men in uniforms.

In his brief catalogue essay, Luc Sante rightly places diCorcia in a line of street photographers ranging "from Atget to Winogrand," likening the "Heads" series to Walker Evans's subway photographs from the late Thirties. Evans, he points out, "used available light, from the incandescent bulbs of the old subway trains." The drama, the theatricality of diCorcia's images is a product of the photographer's strobe-lit wizardry: he manages, even at midday, to shine a spotlight on his target, reducing the surroundings to a darkened stage. As might be expected, diCorcia's lighting heightens exponentially the drama and narrative potential of those images in which more than one person appears. Wearing a suit and tie, a middle-aged white man with a mustache stands, in *Head #06* (2000), just behind the left shoulder of a black teen whose face is mostly obscured by shadow and by an earwarmer pulled low over his brow; the picture dares the viewer to label them detective and prisoner. What Sante doesn't consider is that, by removing his subjects from their environment—their context—diCorcia ceases, really, to work within the tradition of street photography; the street becomes another back-story to the exhibition. Still, eclipsing their urban surroundings in no way darkens the force and beauty of diCorcia's "Heads."

Called at various times a "second generation abstract expressionist" and a New York School painter, Grace Hartigan has never been entirely comfortable with abstraction, nor does she live in New York. At seventy-nine, she directs the Hoffberger Graduate School of Painting at the Maryland Institute of Art. Her stellar retrospective at ACA Galleries[2] presents an artist who, throughout her career, consistently learned new dialects to enrich and alter her pictorial language. Among such contemporaries as Larry Rivers, Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchell, and Jane Freilicher, Hartigan was the only one to overthrow—seemingly decade by decade—her reigning style.

While she made forays into abstraction, Hartigan is essentially a representational painter, one who—like Matisse and de Kooning before her—holds line and color in a tensile faceoff. With its frenetic composition of five figures defaced, scratched, and carved by a palette knife or brush handle, *Showcase* (1955), an early oil-on-canvas work, looks like an accomplished, albeit diluted, de Kooning, and thus displays the virtually inevitable influence for younger vanguard artists in the first half of the Fifties. To the benefit of her development, de Kooning's sway over Hartigan quickly lessened. The oustanding *East Side Sunday* (1956), for instance, collapses landscape, still lifes (of fruit), cubism, and Hans Hofmann into chromatically drenched planes of greens, reds, yellows, blues, oranges, and whites, with some black shading and passages of chiaroscuro. If Hartigan's work from the Fifties played variations on her New York School colleagues, the three canvases on view from the first half of the Sixties showed her moving more deeply, though still irresolutely, into abstraction. *Sunbathers* (1966), the finest of the three, employs flat, brightly toned oils and lyrical forms outlined in black. In the Seventies, that lyricism became more pronounced and the canvases became larger (each around 78 x 88 inches). During this period, she also settled into a representational mode, outlining her figures in black or drawing with the brush in a style one might name modern neoclassical, akin to Picasso's neoclassical drawings and paintings of the Twenties. Boisterous and densely composed, *Purple*

2 "Grace Hartigan: A Survey of Five Decades 1950–2000" was on view at ACA Galleries, New York, from September 15 to October 13, 2001.

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Passion (1973) mixes pop-culture imagery—"his" and "hers" bathroom signs, a Warholian shoe—with more traditional images of wine glasses, jugs, masks, or faces, and, at the center, an inscrutable cat.

All four paintings on view from the Eighties again reflected an uneasy attempt to reintroduce abstract elements into a fundamentally representational format: each depicts a figure, usually a woman, over which Hartigan has dripped and splashed paint. These were the most mannered and least successful of her efforts. Their splatterings obscure the central figure without enhancing the picture as a whole—either compositionally or emotionally. Like the Fifties, the Nineties found Hartigan working in a mode characteristic of the times. Her somewhat cartoon-like, Picassoesque drawings return in palimpsests of historical and nostalgic allusion. Napoleon, the Belle Epoque, and *Le Mort d'Arthur* all make their way into layered paintings, which, while highly accomplished, remind me a bit too insistently of David Salle's weak postmodern juxtapositions and Sue Williams's comic book wall drawings. In fact, taken singly, any one of Hartigan's roughly decade-long stylistic turns leave something to be desired. Yet as a whole, they combine to form an exciting and deeply pleasing body of work. Her strength as an artist, it seems, lies in her ability to change, reform her style, and never cease to demonstrate her ability to absorb and learn.

Also showing in the autumn of a long career, ninety-one-year-old Dorothea Tanning—the widow of Max Ernst, and a writer as well as a visual artist—draws on a culture far more European than Hartigan's.[3] She lived for almost thirty years in France, and the works on view at Zabriskie Gallery evince an affinity for that country's sense of color and pictorial space. Hers are quiet, partially abstract images with traditionally centered compositions and warm, pellucid hues. Neither in her collages nor in her drawings does she strive for the sort of menacing humor or smug conundrums one might expect from an artist so long associated with the Surrealists. Of the work at Zabriskie, it was the drawings that, I suspect, beguiled most viewers. The collages, while satisfactory in their own right, aim perhaps a little too ham-fistedly at pithiness. In several, photographs of hands, both bound with string or unbound, appear, slapping their audience with significance. Torn paper pasted to paper or board creates melodramatic ruptures and fissures, which seem out of keeping with the tone of her collages' whimsical, drawn images—of nude figures doing handstands, for instance, or of an off-kilter bicycle wheel. An author photo of Susan Sontag affixed to one collage made my heart sink: what could be less intellectually engaging in a work of art than a photo of a famous intellectual?

The drawings, however, done in graphite, charcoal, colored pencil, watercolors, or gouache, delight with graceful lines and a languid, sybaritic sense of imagery. *Study for Murmurs* (1976)—in graphite and blue and pink colored pencil—conjoins inside two concentric semicircles the ripely fleshed torso of a woman and a baby. Smaller infants sketched to the right add touches of comedy to an otherwise poignant evocation of motherhood. As is the case in a number of the drawings, *Blue Boy* (1982), a watercolor, uses faintly geometric planes derived from Cézanne to organize the picture, which in this case places in the foreground a voluptuous, womanly figure in a pose reminiscent of one of Matisse's odalisques. Surrealist in spirit, though owing more to Louise Bourgeois than to anyone in Breton's gang, the one sculpture in the show, *Reclining Nude* (1989), is a sewn object of pink fabric, ping-pong balls, wool, and cardboard. It takes the shape of a nude woman's lower torso, out of which protrude three bent limbs. It seems as effective as any of Tanning's or Bourgeois's efforts in sewn soft sculpture, though I must confess

3 "Dorothea Tanning: Drawings, Collages, and Soft Sculptures" was on view at Zabriskie Gallery, New York, from September 6 to October 13, 2001.

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it strikes me as a limited avenue for three-dimensional art, reliant as it is less on the beauty of its form than on the diffuse wit with which it was formed.

The improbably named Whiting Tennis conceals wit in the sly illusions of his painting technique. Obsessed with patterns, Tennis creates wholly representational pictures by combining acrylic paint, collage, and block-cut prints in such a way that one can never quite figure out how they're made. His painted passages often look as though they were printed; some of the printed areas turn out to be collaged elements of, for instance, wallpaper or wood-grain patterns either found, printed, or painted by the artist, depending on the work. To further complicate matters, Tennis often makes larger works composed of pieces of paper that are either painted on, printed on, or found collage elements, so that what appears to be a painting or a print work is in fact a collage in which the various sheets of paper overlap at times, though not so much that they greatly disrupt the image that they compose. Tennis's first solo show in New York, at Derek Eller Gallery,[4] brought together a number of smaller works and one large one, all of them depicting commonplace, even banal, scenes and images: old houses, broken-down buildings, a stand of trees, suburban landscapes, a flag, the sky.

After looking for a while at these works, one realizes that the choice of quotidian subject matter is, in part, a canny means of counterbalancing—and calling attention to—the entirely unordinary techniques with which they were made. The largest work on view, *Mazama Site #1* (2001), is of a ramshackle prairie house with a ruined shed in front. To the right of this shed sits a field of high grass surrounded by tree-covered hills under a blue sky. The 59 x 88 inch work is a conglomeration of painted, printed, and found sheets of paper, and, in a funny aside, strips of masking tape hold the ruined shed to the canvas. Tennis's muted colors only emphasize the humdrum nature of the scene: dark green trees, greenish yellow grass, brown and white cement blocks in the house, green-tinged black tarpaper on the roof. It is the patterning that captivates. Like Bonnard, Tennis finds rhythm in wood grains, the repetition of leaves in trees, in blades of grass, stacks of lumber, walls of brick. The smaller works—such as *Neighborhood* (2001), a rear view of suburban homes, bare trees, a fence, grass, and, in the foreground, a lone ruined chimney; *Theater Shop Group #3* (2001), a collage, cubist in its fractioning, of a single structure built of paper with different brick patterns and wood grains; or *American Flag* (2001) where the flag, printed or painted, flies against a slate-blue sky—hang like comely riddles waiting to be solved. Given his unlikely pairings of subject and method, Tennis almost certainly wants to cause viewers to do a double-take, to provoke an extended examination. Far too few younger artists aspire to such complexity, and even fewer are capable of achieving it.

4 "Whiting Tennis" was on view at Derek Eller Gallery, New York, from September 6 to October 6, 2001.

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New York chronicle: the season begins

by Jay Nordlinger

The New York Philharmonic's season was to have begun with a "gala" concert featuring the German violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter, a longtime friend and favorite of the Philharmonic's director, Kurt Masur. But then came September 11, and, as so many have been saying, "everything changed." The Philharmonic instead presented a performance of the Brahms *Requiem*, a Masur specialty, and well-suited to the occasion. Large flags have been hanging outside all the Lincoln Center buildings. The mood has been patriotic, somber, slightly tense, appreciative—indeed, different.

The next concert was a subscription concert, featuring the *Rückert Lieder* of Mahler and the Franck Symphony. In front of the podium was a microphone, and when Masur stepped up to it, he said, "I'm sorry to have to talk to you again" (given that he had addressed the audience before the *Requiem* performance). Two days before this subscription concert, the violinist Isaac Stern—a beloved figure in the music world, and in New York especially—had died. Masur paid tribute to him, recounting a fascinating story. In 1970, Stern and Masur were to have performed together—the Beethoven concerto—in Rio de Janeiro. But Stern said to him, "I'm sorry, I hadn't realized you were German, and I have pledged not to perform with a German. I'm sorry." Ten years later, however, Stern had a change of heart, ringing up Masur and asking, "Would you play the Beethoven with me?" This touched Masur deeply, and he of course quickly agreed. Stern's death, said Masur, left "a painful, empty place" inside him, and he "dedicated" the evening's concert to Stern, asking, first, for a moment of silence.

The program began with a work by the contemporary Japanese composer Somei Satoh, the *Kisetsu* for Orchestra, one of the many pieces commissioned by the Philharmonic in 1999 for the coming millennium. Masur is interested in things Japanese; it would be appropriate to mention in this context that his wife, in fact, is Japanese. The Satoh piece is minimalist, bleak, and hopeless (Happy 2000!). It is a moonscape, consisting of murmurings and pained cries from the strings, occasionally interrupted by a gong. It was well-paced, well-judged, and well-served by Masur. Yet the stark fear and anxiety expressed by the piece borders on the (unintentionally) comical—Penderecki's *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima* is a chirpy madrigal by comparison.

The soloist in the Mahler was to have been the Austrian mezzo-soprano Angelika Kirchschlager, but she was indisposed. In her place was an American mezzo, Susanne Mentzer, who has been shining in recent seasons in both opera and song. The *Rückert Lieder* are one of the most profound and touching song cycles in the repertory, and the young woman handled it admirably. She has a rich, distinctive voice that you may not call pretty or beautiful, but that is un-

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deniably effective. It has a bottled sound to it. In the song "Liebst du um Schönheit," Mentzer was robust and a little operatic, which isn't necessarily wrong. The wind players, sadly, were sub-par, with sloppy onsets and weak tones. Mentzer is perhaps especially well-suited to "Um Mitternacht," as she does indeed have a midnight voice, with that dark quality, and a throb. Masur's accompaniment, however, was lacking in character, and there were some truly ugly sounds coming from the French horns. Mentzer's final A, on the syllable "nacht," was drowned out, which was a shame.

The greatest, most immortal of the *Rückert* songs is the final one, "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen," and Mentzer sang it with both sensitivity and a welcome straightforwardness. She is a singer of granite control and solid musical instincts. She gave the piece a little more drama than it might have, and a little less detachment than is ideal—this was a rather earthly "Ich bin." But it convinced. I might mention that it would have been nice to hear the closing "t" sound on the final word, "Lied."

For the Franck Symphony, Kurt Masur is just the right man, because he is expert at reining in blowzy, Romantic pieces. Sure enough, he applied his usual Classical discipline to the Franck, the briskness or compactness that his critics despise. The orchestra was soaring, tight (in the good sense—not loose), and moving. In the wrong hands, this piece is flabby, but in Masur's it was rigorous and rather impressive. Many years ago, there was an LP with the delightful title "Classical Music for People Who Hate Classical Music." The album contained showpieces, essentially. Well, Masur might be called a conductor of big, sprawling, slightly unwieldy Romantic pieces for those who aren't so sure about big, sprawling, slightly unwieldy Romantic pieces—Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sheherazade*, for example. On this night, never had Franck sounded more like Beethoven, but he was none the worse for it.

The present season is Masur's last with the Philharmonic. How different the Franck Symphony under his successor, Lorin Maazel, would be! With his tendency to fuss and deaden, he could very well bring out the worst in the piece. Masur, however, did with it about as much as a conductor can—and still that was barely enough.

Among the Metropolitan Opera's first offerings was Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*. Unfortunately, however, the Met's director, James Levine, was not in the pit—he is an especially fine conductor of this opera, as evidenced by his recording for Deutsche Grammophon, boasting the lineup of Mirella Freni, Anne Sophie von Otter, Neil Shicoff, and Thomas Allen. Leading the Met performance was Vladimir Jurowski, born in Moscow, raised in Germany, and the new director of the Glyndebourne Festival. He gave a less than favorable impression, with blunt, dull, indifferent conducting, and a shaky hand on the wheel. In the first act in particular, entrances were uncertain, and coordination between stage and pit—and even within the pit—was wanting. Worse, Tchaikovsky's splendid Act I chorus was without joy, that excited joy it ought to have. It was hard to believe that this chorus could be rendered so dully. At certain points, one wondered whether the performance had been rehearsed.

But things got much better, Jurowski settled down, and the evening finished strong, which is certainly preferable to the opposite trajectory. A Norwegian soprano with the lovely name of Solveig Kringelborn was a worthy Tatiana. She has a good voice, which she deploys well, and she is exceptionally smart about dynamics—for instance, her soft singing is superb. She keeps the air moving through her sound, making it alive and interesting, and allowing a phrase to be properly completed. She acted the part well too, portraying the hesitancy, giddiness, anguish, and composure of this most endearing character. Tatiana's sister, Olga, was sung by the Swedish mezzo Katarina Karnéus, who was solid and tasteful.

The principal men were Marcello Giordani and Thomas Hampson. Giordani, who

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makes a very Italianate Lenski, had a bad start, with lots of bumps, scratches, and other imperfections. He has no lower register to speak of. But, like the conductor and the performance itself, he rebounded, in more than enough time for his big aria, which, though a little rough, was respectable, heartfelt, and sincere. The Italianate ring in his upper register is most effective. As for Hampson, he is a wonderful Onegin, suave, musical, intelligent, and always, it seems, well-prepared. The man is an actor, too, capable of defining a scene or a mood merely with his walk, or his posture. He knows that Onegin is not a bad man, but more like a pitiable fool.

Lesser parts should not go ignored, as they can make or break an operatic performance—they can certainly enhance or detract from one. The Met's hires were first-rate, with the veteran Russian mezzo-soprano Irina Bogatcheva, now a professor at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, making a memorable Filippyevna (Tatiana's nurse). Another veteran, the British bass Robert Lloyd, stopped the show—quite literally—with Prince Gremin's statement, late in the opera. Such a dignified, rich-voiced presence, Lloyd.

Extra-musical elements deserve mention too, in part because they are perhaps not so much extra-musical as complementary. The sets, for example, were beautiful, simple, and imaginative. They were also quite spare, with some scenes containing nothing at all except high white walls. The stage direction, too, was notable—as when Onegin went through the stages of being dressed after killing Lenski in their duel. All in all, a mixed but satisfying night in the opera house, with a work whose appeal doesn't, probably cannot, stale.

Two nights later, the Met offered a Mozart lineup that was about as strong as can be fielded today, for *Idomeneo*. Back in the pit was Levine, an excellent start. And then there were Dawn Upshaw (soprano), Carol Vaness (another soprano), Susan Graham (mezzo-soprano), and Plácido Domingo (tenor—Helden, lyric, and otherwise). Domingo, of course, was the king, Idomeneo, and this is one of the greatest, most rewarding roles in the tenor repertory. It is certainly Mozart's grandest role for tenor, a vocal range that he did not always put centerstage. Luciano Pavarotti, several seasons ago, conquered the part, proving—though no proof should have been necessary—that he is a musician of considerable intelligence and depth, not merely a vocal phenomenon who wows 'em in soccer stadiums.

Domingo, too, is an intelligent and deep singer, and his grasp of the role was sure. Not only is he a signal Otello, Chénier, Siegfried, and Parsifal, but he also can be a compelling Mozartean and even Handelian. I have remarked in these pages before that Domingo has an astonishing ability to defy age, and that ability becomes yet more astonishing with every passing year. His singing in the Mozart was smooth, kingly, and knowing. His phrasing was creamy—Domingo-esque—yet Classical. Odd to say, but he seems a better singer now than he was twenty years ago, not only in interpretive wisdom, but in raw vocal production. He performed virtually without effort. Occasionally he was pinched in the upper and upper-middle registers, but this hardly mattered. Domingo is an Idomeneo whom Mozart would applaud.

Dawn Upshaw, singing Ilia, was a success—clear, lively, convincing. Her recitatives were both musical and dramatic, not mere filler. The care she took with them, and the naturalness she had about them, were exemplary. Her soprano is full-bodied and light at the same time (a full light body, if you will). She has always been a fine Mozartean, as she happened to prove last season at the Met, in *Così fan tutte*. Upshaw tends to behave herself in Mozart, shedding the cutesiness and interpretive blips that mark and mar some of her work in the song literature. Susan Graham was the young prince, Idamante, and in the last few years she has become a Most Valuable Player of the operatic world. Like Susanne Mentzer (with whom she is sometimes confused),

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she is an American mezzo of great versatility and reliability. Her singing of Idamante was strong and purposeful. She had a few worrisome moments at the top of her range, but in general she was rock-solid, as has come to be expected.

Carol Vaness is by now a veteran, and has been associated with Mozart's music all her career. Over the years, she has learned a lot, about many aspects of the voice and of opera, and it all showed in her singing of Elettra. Her technique is quite secure. She did not go for beauty of sound, for this is not the role for that. It is a role for letting it all hang out, vocally and dramatically. Elettra, after all, is a cousin of Strauss's Elektra, making for a time of some abandon. Vaness's characterization was terrific, as her princess—losing out to the sweet Ilia—was stylish, conniving, and pathetic. The aria "O smania! O furie!"—a mini-mad scene—was both passionately and accurately done.

As for the maestro, he exercised his usual command over the stage, pit, and score. The opera was by and large suffused with majesty, high purpose, and, where called for, romantic tenderness. The choruses were all elegant and apt. The quartet in Act II, featuring the four principals, was especially satisfying. Disturbingly, though, several sections of the opera were too slow, dragging, particularly a couple of Ilia's arias. Much of the last act was hampered by slowness, verging on the soporific. It is not like Levine to lose focus or energy—but his was nevertheless an *Idomeneo* to salute.

The second week of October had the Philharmonic giving an exceptionally appetizing program: a Mozart concerto with Alicia de Larrocha, and Rachmaninoff's *Symphony No. 2*, both presided over by the guest conductor, André Previn. Thus did each musician play to his strength, or certainly to a major one.

The concerto was that in D major, K. 537, nicknamed the "Coronation." De Larrocha is an instantly recognizable pianist, not least in Mozart: the rhythm is arresting; the scales and other passagework are sort of detached, chubby, without much legato, but definitely in balance, every note making sense in relation to the others. De Larrocha's playing is often "percussive," to put it in a negative way, or "sharply delineated," to put it in a more favorable one. The trills, too, are utterly distinctive—with lots of air between the notes—and the octaves are solid and bracing. Here is a pianist with many signatures.

She is almost eighty now, the stately, modest queen of the world's pianists. Her performance was rather tired, or routine. Yet the second movement (marked by a publisher "Larghetto") was beautifully and lovingly shaped: it was playful and almost peasant-like, but also regal and dignified. The pianist contributed some really crystalline passages, to go with some thudding ones. The entire movement reaffirmed the specialness of de Larrocha.

And the Rachmaninoff Second reaffirmed that André Previn is one of the great Romantic conductors in the world today, when he is on, as he was this night. His engagement with the score was passionate and intelligent, both natural and learned. With his baton, Previn breathed magnificently all the way through, a master phraser. The Philharmonic strings, particularly in their unison playing, were splendid. The horns were terrific. In the famous, beloved slow movement, Previn was perhaps slower than was absolutely wise, but he kept breathing, and the concluding Allegro vivace was full of vigor, lushness, and glory. Previn is one of the greatest conductors of Elgar ever (along with the Three Bs of the British baton: Beecham, Boult, and Barbirolli); his way with Rachmaninoff is outstanding, too.

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Gold-standard cycling

by Patrick J. Smith

In the October 2000 issue of *The New Criterion*, I reviewed the first two operas of the Seattle Opera's new *Ring* cycle. This year saw the completion of the tetralogy with three complete cycles, of which I saw the first (August 5–10). The positive qualities of Seattle's "realistic" take on the *Ring* that I noted previously shined through in the final two operas; the cycle as a whole is one of the most cohesive and coherent, as well as imaginative and dramatically persuasive, that I have seen.

As is by now obvious, the sheer number of productions of Wagner's *Ring* cycle has led directors and designers to feature ever more outré "conceptions" that become ever more tangential to the spirit—much less the letter—of Wagner's creation. The "conceptionless" productions, however, do not always fare much better. The Metropolitan Opera's attempt at a realistic, back-to-the-original production was sabotaged (and continues to be sabotaged) by an almost total lack of directorial control. Matters proved much better in Seattle, where the scenery designer Thomas Lynch's lifelike forest settings were anchored to Stephen Wadsworth's human-centered direction. The result is a cycle of a highly distinguished order, proceeding from the inside (of the character's motivation) outward. The interpersonal give-and-take of the disparate cast of *Rheingold*, for example, can rarely have been more effectively presented.

Wadsworth, of course, did take some liberties—and several of them were striking. I have waited for years to see a production of *Götterdämmerung* in which Siegfried when disguised as Gunther is played onstage by Gunther. Here, Siegfried, concealed in the cave, sang while Gunther mimed (in a robotic way); at the close of the act, when Siegfried has driven Brünnhilde into the cave, he re-emerged as himself, taking off the Tarnhelm.

The final moments of this *Götterdämmerung* have already been much-derided in the press. Wadsworth had everyone onstage for the apocalypse, with the Valhallans saying fond goodbyes to each other. This cluttered busyness was both obtrusive and unnecessary, but its main defect was that it seriously undercut Wadsworth's moving setting of the finale. Over the "Redemption" theme, the original forest scene re-appeared, but now in late winter with snow. This, in turn, changed to spring and renewal at curtain fall. This amounted to a resolutely "upbeat" ending, which can be justified by the music—though many finales have been staged more equivocally or, indeed, more negatively (as the end of the world). But the Wadsworth take is fully in keeping with the American provenance of the cycle. We as a society tend to think in positive terms—that there will be a tomorrow.

Unlike at Bayreuth, or even at the Met, this new production, unfortunately, will not be seen again for several years. Wadsworth's ideas unfold slowly over the space of the four

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operas, and his "through-lines" of development demand repeated viewing. The use of realistic settings for abstract symbolic purposes was extremely imaginative. That every leaf and rock was delineated did not tie down the settings to their specifics. Wadsworth used the same basic set for the death of Siegmund by Hunding, the murder of the (very realistic) dragon by Siegfried, and the demise of Siegfried himself. Father and son were dispatched in the same way: against the stone face of a cliff, which was defiled by a single bloody mark. Manifestly, the three murders did not take place on the exact same spot, but Wadsworth created a mythic "killing field" that still spotlighted the three deaths individually. Similarly, the spot on which Fasolt the Giant died (in *Rheingold*) became a flowerbed from which Wotan plucked a bloom that he left on the spot where his son died. (At least, I *think* this was the progression—I would like to see the production again!) The elaboration of these ideas clearly required a great deal of care—care that was also displayed in the groundplan of the cycle.

Wadsworth's balancing of seriousness with a brand of lighthearted humor did much to leaven the operas, to their distinct advantage. In my earlier review, I mentioned the individualization of the Valkyries; at this performance I again noticed the singling-out of Waltraute by Brünnhilde in *Walküre*, which foreshadowed her appearance in *Götterdämmerung*. The feathery banter of the Rhinemaidens scene, which begins the last act of *Götterdämmerung* and is clearly intended by Wagner to provide the lightness that will accentuate the grimness of the oncoming tragedy, is often treated coarsely or farcically: here as elsewhere the touch was perfect.

The costumes of Martin Pakledinaz blended well into the production, with colors denoting specific groups: red for Wotan and his progeny, blue for Fricka and hers, purple for the Gibich tribe. Siegmund's grungy red coat appeared throughout the rest of the cycle, becoming another through-line, like the ring itself. The decision to outfit Greer Grimsley's Gunther as Napoleon III was an inspired joke that probably escaped most in the audience, but it inadvertently portrayed the character's weakness (for that emperor gets no good press).

The cast's performances, with the exception (noted last season) of Phillip Joll's effortful and hoarse Wotan, were of a very high order. Jane Eaglen's Brünnhilde was a fine example: she seems more relaxed singing in Seattle than elsewhere, and, though she's still no actress, she moves more easily and sings with a freedom that I haven't heard from her at the Met. She certainly capped the climax with her Immolation Scene—a scene as commanding vocally and histrionically as you are likely to see performed by anyone singing today. As was widely reported in the press, the Siegfried, the Canadian tenor Alan Woodrow, severed the quadriceps muscle in his leg the day before he went on in the role. Since he could use his voice (but not negotiate the difficult set) it was determined that he would sing from the side of the stage while his understudy, Richard Berkeley-Steele, acted and mimed the role. Berkeley-Steele looked like a stripling in his teens, and for the first time I understood what a strong opera *Siegfried* could be if the singer visually matched the role—what is usually clumsy and even silly becomes quite believable from a gawky teenager.

The advantage of Wadsworth's personality-driven production was evidenced by Richard Paul Fink's Alberich and Thomas Harper's Mime—both seen as corrupted humans rather than as exaggerated grotesques. Stephen Milling again dominated *Walküre* as a fearsome Hunding, but Stephanie Blythe was a major-voiced Fricka and Peter Kazaras a wily but oddly sympathetic Loge. The acrobatic Rhinemaidens were also strong-voiced, and the choice to cast Blythe as the Second Norn (with Luretta Bybee as the First, and the Sieglinde, Margaret Jane Wray, as the Third) was truly gold-standard cycling.

Franz Vote's conducting of the operas

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showed a lack of experience in the overall pacing: better during the famous moments than throughout the "recitative" portions, which can be integrated fruitfully into the whole only with time and practice. Yet the key feature of this *Ring* was the unity of singing, setting, and directing, with each aspect contributing to the totality of a perfect blend. Since the conception sprang from the subtleties of the characters' motivations, rather than from any flashiness of gesture, the merits of this take on one of the central epics of the nineteenth century (the other is *Faust*) will not be instantly appreciated. If there were a video, it could be studied as Patrice Chéreau's has been and perhaps ideas could be purloined.

I doubt, however, that such study would prove very fruitful, as the performance depended heavily on the talents of the artists themselves, rather than on the imposition of heavy-handed "concepts." The performance in Seattle, that is to say, displayed rather specific merits. All in all, the production offered a convincing vision of the epic that Wagner's genius produced.

Opera note

The Glimmerglass Opera Festival.
July 19–August 1, 2001

The Glimmerglass Opera of Cooperstown, New York, housed in a nine-hundred-seat opera house that is one of the finest facilities in which to see and hear operas in the United States, has in recent years served as a feeder for productions at the New York City Opera (most—if not all—wend southward to the New York State Theater)—where generally they look worse. The summer repertory is a mix of operas from the four centuries of the form's history and includes out-of-the-way works as well as standards. The house is particularly suited to baroque opera, and the current Handel boom owes a good deal to productions at the Glimmerglass.

This year's Handel, the early (1700) *Agrippina*, was—perhaps surprisingly—an audience favorite; its lively plot (the Nero theme) and youthfully brash music (Handel emerging full-grown from his cocoon), allied to a deftly updated staging by Lillian Groag and a strong cast under the knowing baton of Harry Bicket made for a very diverting evening. The other rarity, Emmanuel Chabrier's operetta *L'Etoile*, could be termed a *croque-en-bouche du générale* because you either love it for its effervescent tunefulness or hate it for its frothy insubstantiality. It is typical of a whole genre of French light works that are all too rarely performed. Mark Lamos's production made the most of the work's wit without allowing it to degenerate into tastelessness. And the cast and the conductor Stewart Robertson recognized that lightness, in operetta no less than in champagne, has a real value.

A similar lightness was not found in Stephen Lawless's rather dogged view of Mozart's *Nozze di Figaro*, which was based around a bed placed at center stage for most of the evening and starred a cast that seemed to want to undress at every moment, as if tormented by lice. The concept worked pretty well for three of the four acts, mostly owing to the talents of the singers—an excellent bunch led by Dean Ely's Figaro, Joyce Guyer's Countess, Christopher Schaldenbrand's Count, and Nicole Heston's Susanna. The last act, however, was a disaster (it is always the most difficult to stage), and ended with everyone in underwear.

I am not an admirer of Benjamin Britten's *Rape of Lucretia*, finding the libretto by Ronald Duncan, with its Christian-centered moralistic chorus superimposed on the Roman tale, both sanctimonious and passé—an amalgam of the worst features of T. S. Eliot and C. S. Lewis. It is very much a product of postwar Britain—and postwar Britten—and is today a home brew. Christopher Alden's updated production did little to enliven the proceedings, though the cast (notably Nathan Gunn as Tarquinius, Michelle DeYoung as Lucretia, and William Burden and Christine Goerke as the Male and Female Chorus) gave splendid performances.

—Patrick J. Smith

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The media

Cranks & clichés

by James Bowman

"Language failed this week," wrote Michiko Kakutani of *The New York Times* as the dramatic first paragraph of her two-cents' worth about the terror attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. It was itself an example of what she described, being a banality of the first order founded upon the childish assumption that language might do anything but "fail" under the circumstances. But, of course, she didn't intend any such subtlety. The remark's subtext was that *her* language, at least, would not fail. Like so many other eager wordsmiths, she felt up to the literary task of memorializing the event or she would not have written thus, and her first clever stroke was to be this insightful and original observation of language's hitherto unrecognized inadequacies.

Yet she wrote truer than she knew. For those who expected of language no more than what it could provide, namely a gravity and decorum appropriate to the occasion, were also too often disappointed. It would be tedious to go over the many verbal memorials that adorned magazines, op-ed pages, Arts and Style sections, lovingly wrought by (apparently) lady- and gentleman-reporters with extensive backgrounds in "creative writing." Even the editorialists got into the act, as this passage from a *New York Times* editorial on September 12 suggests:

> Remember the ordinary, if you can. Remember how normal New York City seemed at sunrise yesterday, as beautiful a morning as ever dawns in early September. The polls had opened for a primary election, and if the day seemed unusual in any way, that was the reason—the collective awareness that the night would be full of numbers. All the innumerable habits and routines that define a city were unbroken. Everyone was preoccupied, in just the way we usually call innocence.

Oh please! Nobody but an editorial writer straining for effect ever calls preoccupation "innocence." This trope of "innocence"—so often seen before, yet so seldom eschewed as hackneyed (not to mention false)—was predictably a great favorite with The Creatives. On the same day, *The Washington Post*'s "Style" section featured an article by David Montgomery that was headlined: "Under a Cloud of Evil: Their Remaining Innocence in Shreds, People Shudder and Carry On."

> It was a day in Washington that people compared to the day President Kennedy was assassinated, or when Pearl Harbor was bombed. America has lost its innocence many times, but this was a day to discover all over again that the country still had something left to lose.
>
> A thick column of smoke rose black and blunt from the burning Pentagon for most of the day, like a new, sinister kind of Washington Monument. . . . Wealth and power are supposed to ensure peace at home. The ap-

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> parent vulnerability of a superpower is shocking. Yesterday people studied the black cloud over the capital with grief, rage, incomprehension. It signaled things would be different from now on.
>
> "Today we realize the world is a really scary place," said Wendy Mills of Arlington. "This shatters the bubble of invulnerability." . . . So this is the way the world really works. Terror. Death from above at any minute. Our smiley-face sense of security has been shredded. How could we have been so naïve?
>
> Or have we not been naïve at all? Is this day a freakish departure, not the start of a trend, that we must not allow to warp our outlook?

This is a very special kind of nonsense, since no one but the foolish ever really inhabited that mythical "bubble of invincibility"; nobody but an idiot ever supposed that wealth and power ensured peace at home. Montgomery's faux-elegiac lament for the chance to be foolish is itself a foolish posture in response to the deaths of thousands of people. But I do not think that we are meant to take the literal sense of what he writes seriously. We are meant instead, as a kind of courtesy to the writer and to the gravity of the occasion, to go along quietly as we are herded into that naïve but merely literary "we" whose alleged "smiley-face sense of security" has allegedly been "shredded."

The point, however well-hidden by rhetorical artifice—and usually it was not well-hidden at all—was to involve the reader in a conspiracy to make the loss our own, rather than that of the actual victims and their families. The death of people is horrible and messy and inelegant; the death of anything so ephemeral as innocence, even if it is (as it must be) only conventional, is much better suited to the genteel task of writing newspaper memorials. It also allows the memorialist a chance to push himself and his beautiful language forward as the center of attention. In this way it is the literary counterpart of the emotional exhibitionism in which television specializes. It is a depressing thought but undoubtedly true that there will be people who remember September 11 because it was the occasion for Dan Rather to break down on the David Letterman show.

The worst offender among the literary showoffs, however, was *The New Yorker*—not even counting the appalling, politically motivated efforts of two of that magazine's most illustrious contributors, Susan Sontag and John Lahr, to find a way to pin the blame for the attacks on the Bush administration. But I forbear to animadvert further on the disgraceful performance of this *fons et origo* of the new genteelism, as the job has already been done so splendidly by Leon Wieseltier on the back page of *The New Republic*. In a blistering attack on the magazine's attempt "to meet atrocity with sensibility," he is particularly scathing about Adam Gopnik (who shows his "skill for shrinking everything in the universe to the scale of a bourgeois amenity" by comparing the smell of disaster to that of smoked mozzarella) and John Updike, who

> witnessed the fall of the towers from an apartment in Brooklyn, but he produced a description of what he saw that would not differ from a description of a painting of what he saw. . . . Such writing defeats its representational purpose because it steals attention away from reality and toward language. It is provoked by nothing so much as its own delicacy. Its precision is a trick; it appears to bring the reader near, but it keeps the reader far. It is in fact a kind of armor: an armor of adjectives and adverbs. The loveliness is invincible. . . . There are circumstances in which beauty is an obstacle to truth. All this is the testimony of a man who has words for everything and nothing but words.

Wieseltier points us towards the insight that it is the fine writer, innocence's elegist, who is the true innocent. His protection against the agony that comes, and has always come, with experience, is not a foolish and childish innocence-as-ignorance, not mere naïveté, but a determined blindness made palatable

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to him by the scrim of words he has always prepared to drop between himself and any unpleasantness.

The New Republic was also good about compiling a *sottisier* of journalistic and political comment called "Idiocy Watch" that, with any luck, will make at least some of its unwitting contributors long remembered for their foolishness. First prize among the idiots undoubtedly went to Hillary Rodham Clinton, whose oft-quoted response to a question about whether or not she could understand the anger of the terrorists against America bears quoting once again:

> Oh I am well aware that [murderous anger] is out there. One of the most difficult experiences that I personally had in the White House was during the health-care debate, being the object of extraordinary rage. I remember being in Seattle. I was there to make a speech about health care. This was probably August of '94. Radio talk show hosts had urged their listeners to come out and yell and scream and carry on and prevent people from hearing me speak. There were threats that were coming in, and certain people didn't want me to speak, and they started taking weapons off people, and arresting people. I've had firsthand looks at this unreasoning anger and hatred that is focussed on an individual you don't know, a cause that you despise whatever motivates people.

Headed "Me, me, me (Part II)"—"Me, me, me (Part I)" being a quotation from Mrs. Clinton's husband—this was a reminder that the essence of bad taste and bad judgment in writers and speakers during a time of crisis, as much for the creative writers as for opportunistic politicians, was to divert attention away from the crisis and back to themselves. It was hardly surprising, then, that when Mrs. Clinton finally visited the site of the World Trade Center nearly a month after September 11, she described it as "the most personally horrendous experience" and said that attending to the attack's aftermath was "all I'm doing and all I'm thinking about." In this respect, the bad taste of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson in suggesting after the fashion of a truly old-time religion that the attack was God's judgment on American wickedness had at least the merit of being an attempt to interpret the thing itself and not to redirect their audience's gaze to themselves and their own exquisite sensibilities or political sufferings.

Of course, I would be the first to agree that the right to bad taste is constitutionally guaranteed to every American. One of the funniest passages in the comically self-absorbed debate about "free speech" that ensued in some quarters after the attacks came in response to an op-ed article by Robert Jensen, a professor of journalism at the University of Texas, in *The Houston Chronicle*. Jensen claimed that the terror attack "was no more despicable than the massive acts of terrorism . . . that the U.S. government has committed during my lifetime." Not surprisingly, the article elicited an outpouring of protest—from, among others, the president of the University of Texas, Larry Faulkner, who wrote in a letter to the *Chronicle* that he was "disgusted" by Jensen's "misguided" piece and called the professor, his employee, a "fountain of undiluted foolishness." Thankfully, he added, "there is some comfort in the fact that practically no one here takes his outbursts seriously."

Well, maybe seriously enough to employ him in a position of responsibility to instruct the impressionable youth of Texas in the art (such as it is) of journalism—and, presumably, the science of politics. But, as might almost have been expected, it was then Mr. Faulkner who came under fire from the champions of free speech at his university who, according to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, thought that his criticism of Jensen would have "a chilling effect" on the willingness of faculty members to speak out. You've got to wonder, though, don't you? If a terror attack by religious fanatics that kills 6000 of the guy's fellow-countrymen doesn't have a chilling effect, his moral insulation has got to be proof

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against a mere letter to the editor, even if it is from his boss. What else is tenure for? But "the faculty felt there was a very clear message that if you stick your neck out, we will disown you," University of Texas faculty member Dana L. Cloud told *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. "This was a symbolic casting out of Bob Jensen from our intellectual community."

Poor man! How he must be suffering!

I've always thought of myself as a First Amendment absolutist, but there is something ridiculous about people who would seize upon an occasion like this to insist on their right to be obnoxious to their fellow citizens. It's another route to the same ground occupied by emotional exhibitionists or the Me-Me-Me Clintons or the creative writers: an expropriation of tragedy for purposes of self-aggrandizement. Another professor cited by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* complained when, in giving voice to sentiments almost as outrageous as Jensen's, he had been heckled. But what about the hecklers' right to free speech? I agree that it's bad manners not to give even a loony tune a respectful hearing, though it's not nearly such bad manners as priggishly informing someone who has just suffered a grievous injury that it's his own damn fault —even if it were his fault.

Yet in the aftermath of the attacks, tasteless egotism was on the whole less a problem than the all-enveloping banality that was especially evident in the seemingly endless television coverage. Here, for instance, is Peter Jennings's idea of cogent commentary —irresistible to quote at length—as transcribed from his marathon broadcast (clocked at seventeen hours on the air on September 11–12) by the Media Research Center:

> Now that's the Palestinian President, Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization, Yasser Arafat who as I think everybody who watches the news or reads the news these days understands is in a very very bitter war with the Israelis, and in which terrorism has been a factor. Palestinians see what the Israelis do to them as terrorism, and certainly the Israelis and much of the world see the Palestinian and other suicide bombers who've attacked inside Israel to be terrorism of the most gruesome order. No question about that, and so we should not be surprised as on previous circumstances, to see Chairman Arafat, expressing his condolences, but other Palestinians, who believe the United States is responsible for what Israel is doing to the Palestinians or at least complicit and is certainly supplying the Israelis arms will be happy to see this attack on the United States today. So take a look at a scene from Jerusalem not too long ago in which there is some celebration, that the powerful United States has been harmed, has been seen to be vulnerable, has been hurt I suppose in the broadest sense of the word.
>
> And the people who go off to do this sort of thing both in the Middle East tonight must remember that a vast majority, of the, vast majority of the population of the Middle East now, in all countries is under 21, much of it under 15, certainly under 17, and the kind of intensity and intention if one presumes this is terrorism, one [inaudible] this terrorism has come, had its genesis or had its roots somewhere in the Middle East, or at least in people who are opposed, have, are just filled, brimming with anger at the United States, and we are now becoming more experienced with the notion that there are young men for the most part, who are prepared to blow themselves up along with everybody else in terms, if they can be, if they can be a service to the cause and they believe, they believe as do some people believe about Islam, that they will, by sacrificing themselves gone to another place.
>
> It's an unfair comment on Islam in some respects, but it is certainly a motivating factor that the hatred of the United States, and the hatred of the United States as a patron of Israel, whether you're from Afghanistan, or whether you're from Iran, Iraq, or inside the Palestinian territories is so intense at some levels, and has become more intense in recent months, that nobody will be, very many people will not be surprised at this attack today though like everybody else will be amazed at the magnitude and success of it.

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But one feels rather churlish for criticizing the media at a time when, at least in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, so many otherwise world-bestriding journalists permitted themselves an unwonted and embarrassing measure of patriotism. Even the implacable Brent Bozell, head of the bias-monitoring MRC, wrote that "our national news media have answered the call to duty with professionalism and patriotism. Let us cheer the important and inspiring work done by our nation's journalists." For at least a little while, those of us who make it our business to read and listen day by day to the prevailing media bias against President Bush, his administration, and even the U.S. armed forces—which have not been, institutionally, the good guys in any commercially released American motion picture since the 1960s—were tempted to believe that we really had gone to sleep and awakened, as so many of the prose stylists of the papers told us we had, in a different world.

In one respect, at least, I thought the media was too generous to the administration. This was in the reception given to President Bush's speech of September 20, concerning which Dan Rather said: "No President since Franklin Delano Roosevelt, after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, has delivered anything approaching a speech such as this and there may be those who observe that no President in the history of our country has ever delivered a speech such as this." Though characteristically over-the-top, this view was not untypical. George Stephanopoulos said that Bush "was resolved, he was reassuring, he was sober, he was strong." Tom Brokaw called it "strong" and "eloquent" and Tim Russert "excellent," while NBC's on-air expert, Stephen Ambrose, said it was reminiscent of Churchill, full of "lines that are going to resonate with the American people for a very long time."

Well, maybe. I do not deny that the speech was good. Indeed, I wonder whether it wasn't too good. Once again, the carefully wrought prose was not a lens through which we could see more clearly what had been done to the country and what the country's leaders were proposing to do about it. It was a screen on which both things were painted, by consensus, in a way that would justify the carefully calibrated political response—as when he said that the hijackers "follow in the path of fascism, Nazism, and totalitarianism," and it was instantly obvious that "totalitarianism" had been pencilled in over "Communism" in order to avoid offending the nominally Communist Chinese. The taste of the Bush speech writers was not to be faulted, but here was a case where we might have preferred just the hint of bad taste, just the suggestion that Bush was expressing something that he was feeling himself and not something that his handlers had told him it was all right to feel.

There must have been some sense in the White House that Bush needed to show himself in more unscripted circumstances. In announcing the commencement of American and British bombing of Afghanistan, he repeated "we will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail" from the September 20th speech, adding "we will not waver" at the beginning of the series, as if to make it a slogan. A few days later, however, he appeared at a mostly impromptu press conference and still received good reviews. Dana Milbank of *The Washington Post* wrote that, despite the lack of the earlier speech's "Churchillian phrases" the president had "presented a homier, common-sense discussion of the war." Alessandra Stanley of *The New York Times* wrote that Bush had succeeded in reassuring the world by speaking "without a net" and "showing the confidence to risk mistakes and speak freely, at times forcefully." She added that "the news conference indicated Mr. Bush's progress in finding his own straightforward, conversationally unassuming style."

For once, a conservative president's "growing" in office may be allowed to mean something other than his growing less conservative.

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Fiction chronicle

On the hysterical playground

by Max Watman

Why can't you ever write a plain sentence like "He finished his drink, left the pub and went home?"

—Kingsley Amis to Martin Amis

Some very good books have been written by misanthropes. One certainly can't accuse Dawn Powell of being keen on people, or Evelyn Waugh of cutting anybody slack. But their books are satirical novels, their characters largely conceived to illustrate, or prove, just how awful everybody is. I am not sure if Jonathan Franzen is a misanthrope, but he demonstrates in his new novel *The Corrections*[1] a dislike for his subjects that is sharp and unflinching. He humiliates these awful people in public and in private, shows us their social and intimate incapacities, and brings us internal monologues that reveal petty, selfish motivations. *The Corrections* is not, however, a satirical novel. Franzen was clearly after a broader stroke, and as a result the novel hovers somewhere between *Goodbye Columbus* and a Big Portrait of American Life.

James Wood dubbed a subspecies of the long novel "hysterical realism." These are the heavy tomes that spill ambition all over the floor of Barnes & Noble. Pretentious and clever, they set up complex series of parallelisms and hint at deep layers of meaning. Puns and clever names abound. Each bizarre coincidence, each brazen analogue, doppelgänger, and paranoiac symbol sucks a little more meaning from the book until we are left with just a web of unexplored options, a mere mosaic of literary jokes. These books give us insight only into the verbal tics and hobby horses of their authors.

Though advertised as such, it is wrong to lump *The Corrections* with the big "smart" books by Salman Rushdie, Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, and Thomas Pynchon. It is a more serious novel, and a straighter one. Yes, a nursing home is called the Deepmire; walk-on characters have names like Pudge Portleigh. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, clues such as these hinted at a depth Pynchon wouldn't give us. Here they are throwaways. Franzen does not expect jokes to fill in for character or plot, both of which he has masterfully written. But something keeps him on the hysterical playground—it may just be a conspiracy of blurbists and critics. (One reviewer wondered if Franzen hadn't cooked up the ultimate postmodern trick of writing a traditional novel that had a narrative that was so slick that no one could tell it was really a postmodern trick at all.)

Smart-aleck novels have blown-up tractor-trailers on the highway to stand in for the foul weather of marriage; Franzen does it with dinner. After a middle-aged Alfred and Enid fight, Enid serves up revenge in the form of liver and onions. They throw

1 *The Corrections*, by Jonathan Franzen; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 528 pages, $26.

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their child Chip into the fray. He must clear his plate—he's there all night. The scene unfolds vividly, over many pages, a simple family drama full of frustration, aggression, and barely consensual sex. The webs of correspondence are secondary; Franzen writes first about complicated people.

Alfred and Enid are the aging parents of Gary, Chip, and Denise. Enid's dream is to gather the family together for "one last Christmas" in St. Jude (yes, the patron saint of desperate causes). Around the family's Christmas swirls a series of interconnected stories including, but not at all limited to: the use and abuse of psychotropic medicines in and out of clinical settings, free-market Lithuania, restaurant work, academia, and what it means to grow old.

Alfred, who was a railroad man, understands his internal functioning as an agglomeration of switching stations and engineering. During a demented fit on the floor of a cruise ship, he finds himself wrestling with adult diapers:

> With fifty years of experience as an engineer he could see at a glance that the emergency contractor had botched the job. One of the diapers was twisted nearly inside out and a second had a mildly spastic leg sticking through two of its plies, leaving most of its absorptive capacity unrealized in a folded mass, its adhesive stickers adhering to nothing.

Gary, a banker, understands his psychology as a CNBC market report:

> Declines led advances in key indices of paranoia (e.g., his persistent suspicion that Caroline and his two older sons were mocking him), and his seasonally adjusted assessment of life's futility and brevity was consistent with the overall robustness of his mental economy. He was not the least bit clinically depressed.

Chip, an ex-professor on a prostitute's massage table in Lithuania, reflects upon the "(trans)act(ion)" taking place.

The women, however, are all but devoid of contemplative capability. They want others and they want Christmas, but they don't struggle with the roots or causes of what they do. They manipulate and disapprove. They assess and work to impress. When Denise considers her relationship with an underling of her father's, it is "a dissatisfaction that pinching sensitive parts of herself might address but couldn't fix." When her father has difficulty understanding the world, he recalls Schopenhauer. Denise pinches herself.

Careful writing means a lot to Jonathan Franzen. He was my teacher once, and, after my classmates and I had made him read a particularly sloppy batch of stories and novel excerpts, he passed out a photocopied sheet on which he'd drawn a graph of the proper tenses and uses of "lie" and "lay." Later he opened class with a well-deserved short lecture on the difference between concrete and cement. But it was only a matter of time until someone pulled a copy of *Strong Motion* (his second book) off a shelf and found "Thump thump went the volleyball." Struggling, desk-lamp lit well into the night, to come up with "Thump thump went the volleyball" is absurd. One is a long way from the serpentine musicality of Henry James.

Franzen's mellifluousness, moreover, gets the best of him at times:

> By now [the non-bell that symbolized anxiety] had been ringing for so many hours that the Lamberts no longer heard the message of bell ringing but, as with any sound that continues for so long that you have the leisure to learn its component sounds (as with any word you stare at until it resolves itself into a string of dead letters), instead heard a clapper rapidly striking a metallic resonator, not a pure tone but a granular sequence of percussions with a keening overlay of overtones; ringing for so many days that it simply blended into the background except at certain early morning hours when one or the other of them awoke in a sweat and realized that a bell had been ringing in their heads for as long as they could remember; ringing for so many months that the sound had given way to a kind of meta-

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> sound whose rise and fall was not the beating of compression waves but the much, much slower waxing and waning of their consciousness of the sound.

Gosh—do you hear something?

And what of the bizarre missteps in the book? Franzen calls a truck a "Ford Stomper"? He knows that some restaurant cooks use Garland stoves. He identifies a discontinued Levi's jacket. There is no such truck as a Ford Stomper. Why has the reader been asked to discern an intent here?

These are, however, only small errors and distractions in a powerful book. *The Corrections* has been rightly marketed and reviewed as this year's major novel. It is an adroit one, both hilarious and stirring, and deserves the many kudos it is sure to gather. But Franzen needs to sever his ties with the young and hip.

T. C. Boyle is down and out. His new collection of short stories reads like a hack dramatization of the newspaper.[2] We are presented with "the story about the guy who goes nuts on the airplane, and the woman who thwarts him," "The upper middle class college couple who threw their baby in the dumpster," and "Big trouble at the abortion clinic." These are the skeletons of stories, the product of a late night brainstorm never elucidated.

Boyle built his reputation on books such as *Greasy Lake*, in which he switched styles from story to story and took extraordinary leaps of imagination. A man runs for political office on the platform that our old moon is dirty and run down, what we need is a shiny new moon. He wins. It was as if Boyle was doing card tricks. There was so much up his sleeve and a ceaseless banter, his eyebrows working, distracting you from the moil of it. The stories seemed effortless.

Boyle's slippage is evident in his writing. In "Captured by the Indians" (the one about life near the railroad tracks before a serial killer who transports himself via rail is caught), a woman is listening to classical music on NPR. He writes: "the doorbell rang. The violin died at that moment—literally." No, it didn't. His range of character has thinned, too. Seven of the sixteen stories are the tales of underachieving drunks. Another is a bartender.

In the title story, a high school social-studies teacher has taken a sabbatical to write a memoir. Luckily ensconced in his mountain retreat, the writer misses the wildly contagious and disgusting virus that plagues the world and wipes out almost everyone. Our hero returns to an empty Los Angeles. There is a small love story, but the most interesting thing about living post-plague, as far as Boyle imagines, is the ability to take things from stores and drive whatever kind of car you want. This is a thirteen-year-old boy's vision of the apocalypse. We have a man devoid of grief taking *all the CDs he wants* from the store. He doesn't even have to *pay* for them.

Boyle's inventiveness is forced and his breezy, conversational prose has come to seem lazy, not casual.

In Walter Kirn's *Up in the Air*,[3] the voice of the MBA has moved into literature, but Kirn so explodes the language of business that it eventually becomes fun. Still, the first 115 pages drag on like a weekend seminar on "Staying on Top: Proactive Paradigm Shifting in Value-Added Delivery Mechanisms and the Post-It Note."

Ryan Bingham is weary. He is a Career Transition Counselor (he fires people and makes them believe that they can and will find another job). His letter of resignation is already on his boss's desk, and when the boss returns from a Belize fishing trip, that's that. In the meantime, Bingham is shooting for the million frequent flier miles mark on his company's travel allowance.

Bingham's observations and occasional pep talks to the employees of the service

2 *After the Plague and Other Stories*, by T. C. Boyle; Viking, 320 pages, $26.95.

3 *Up in the Air*, by Walter Kirn; Doubleday, 303 pages, $29.95.

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industry in which he lives keeps things rolling. He asks a fumbling kid at a car rental agency:

> "Excuse me, what's your job?" I say.
> "My Job? Filling out rental agreements."
> "No it's not. Your job is providing a service that meets a need."
> He stares at me.
> "Tell me the need," I say.
> "A four-door Nissan."
> "Actually, what I want, my basic desire, is to get to a business meeting across town punctually, comfortably, and safely. The Nissan's a means to an end. It's just a detail. Try to think less about isolated tasks and more about the overarching process. It will serve you, believe me."

He's a Super-Traveler, capable of constructing complete sentences under duress. Bingham is also writing a book, and the contact with publishing is droll. After a frustrating conversation with one of Advanta's assistant editors, who has mislaid his book—but who is willing to summarize it for the editor (without having understood a word of it)—Bingham asks:

> "Does Advanta make a profit?"
> "It's publishing. Profits are secondary."
> "That's what's scaring me."

Pulp novels about businessmen fly off the shelves in airports. Between their gold-lettered covers gray-suited guys in London Fog overcoats turn into heroes. If political and legal thrillers hinged on palm computing devices and rental cars and frequent flier miles, they would flop like Hedwig at the Elk's Lodge. To write of the business traveler is to flirt with the imitative fallacy. The central problem of the middle-class novel is that the middle class is not much fun. If you want to write a fun book, stick with desperate, shoeless recent immigrants who beat their children and eat funny, stinky food. Rich people are good, too. We can ogle their stuff and admire them. Most difficult is the middle, the spot where we assume most of America lives (though I suspect it is our writers that maintain the most prototypical American family). Much time is spent uncovering the great immoderate conspicuity of the moderately successful, moderately religious anti-grotesque. Without that salience, there is no foil for our Ozzie and Harriet. We are left with *Blue Velvet* lacking a hot-rodding nitrous-oxide-breathing deviant.

Up in the Air is not fun until one realizes that things are not as they seem. Either Bingham's memory is shoddy, or someone else is masquerading as him, buying Christmas presents for his sister. He traces mysterious telephone calls back to mini-mart payphones. He has bizarre credit card problems. A briefcase appears in lost luggage that he hasn't carried in years; inside is a plush toy he once used in motivational therapy with a bullet hole in its head. People drop conversations when he is within earshot. Is it a malicious conspiracy? Is it a benevolent mystery caused by the elusive super-boutique consultancy MythTech? Is he insane?

Also teetering on the brink of sanity and chasing after a record, J. Sutter moves through the pages of Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days*[4] like a cardboard cutout of Jimmy Carter in front of the White House. He's there for the cheap Polaroid. He's thin and will stand wherever necessary. The reader can feel Whitehead pick him up and put him in the next shot. Cartoons populate the book, light, two-dimensional characters that never shift or surprise. Sutter is a hack freelancer, and he is trying to set the record for the most consecutive press functions. A junket brings him to Talcott, West Virginia to cover the debut of the John Henry stamp and the first annual John Henry festival.

This sets in motion a stupefying gyre of a book. Caricatures march through jagged-edged episodes. We drift through imagist renderings of scene, such as this pile of

4 *John Henry Days*, by Colson Whitehead; Doubleday, 389 pages, $24.95.

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language meant to summon the county fair:

> Big weekend for the local distributor of miniature American flags. Shoddy work, translucent fabric, but the weekend's take eventually gets kicked up to the manufacturer and there are no repercussions. Fanny packs horde valuables, identification. The scratching of Velcro vies for attention with the distant crickets. Somewhere out of sight many voices cry out in surprise and people hustle to see what they are missing. Or maintain speed, confident that the display will continue. He comments to his girlfriend and when she doesn't answer discovers a stranger beside him. She has exact change, but her hands are too sweaty, her pants too tight to get at it. An insurance salesman wipes his brow over the fine print, over his wobbly legged foldup table.

It is reminiscent of William Gaddis's brilliantly cobbled cocktail parties in *The Recognitions*, but without any insight or weight. The shifting steadycam suggests Dos Passos, but without the bright intensity.

Whitehead is a relentless scene shifter. We jump around between a menacing stamp collector, a woman whose father collected John Henry memorabilia, John Henry himself, a history professor, a blues musician, J. Sutter's mother on Strivers Row. We suddenly find ourselves reading about the intricacies of purchasing firearms in Maryland or a screenplay or an excerpt from the *Hamms Stamp Gossip*. Interesting elements but they don't coalesce.

The prose is also bizarre:

> Most of the tables had already been colonized by other factions, but there is Frenchie tracking ahead, wading between chairs before the rest of them have finished taking stock of the room, on point, surveying, dithering a little between two tables to the far left of the podium before dropping his bag on one and motioning the other junketeers over.

Frenchie, in one sentence, tracks, wades, surveys, dithers, drops, and motions. He is on point, like a hound. He is a surveyor in a colonized wading pool. Whitehead writes in faux heroic tone: "In the airport he had glimpsed [prime rib] in a vision and now it has come to pass." He writes in faux street tone: "At the all night bodega of souls the crackheads promenade, jigger and shimmy." If the book happens to approach something resembling a plot, Whitehead skips away from it, more interested in his shoddy mural.

Whitehead wants us to see How It Is, but he's not up to the task. He doesn't have the wrought sentences or good timing or aggressive, pregnant prose that have made such books succeed. He certainly doesn't have a grip on the country. Planting yourself in the present tense and skipping along the surface of an imagined America (really an Americana) doesn't cut it. *John Henry Days* ends up a mess of big-book kitsch with a pretense to intelligence and no gravity.

Consider, in contrast, last year's big book, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, recently issued in paperback.[5] Joseph Kavalier escapes Nazi-occupied Prague and lands in Brooklyn, where he meets his cousin, Sam Klayman, who changes his name to Sam Clay. Sam convinces their boss to let them start a comic book. Chabon writes that "in the immemorial style of young men under pressure, they decided to lie down for a while and waste time."

> Sammy lay down on a spavined purple davenport; Joe, on the floor, was aware for a moment that he was lying on a sour-smelling oval braided rug, in an apartment recently vacated by a girl who had impressed him, in the few instants of their acquaintance, as the most beautiful he had ever seen in his life, in a building whose face he had scaled so that he could begin to produce comic books for a company that sold farting pillows in Manhattan, New York, where he had come by way of Lithuania, Siberia, and Japan. Then a toilet flushed elsewhere in the apartment, and

5 *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, by Michael Chabon; Picador, 656 pages, $15 paper.

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> Sammy peeled his socks off with a happy sigh, and Joe's sense of the present strangeness of his life, of the yawning gap, the long unretractable path that separated him from his family receded from his mind.

Kavalier and Clay is an amazing adventure, conjured with a feel for the limits of probability. Throughout, the dialogue sparkles with yiddish rhythm.

> ". . . Your angels look a little like superheroes."
> "Well, it's a comic book."
> "This is what I'm thinking."
> "Jewish superheroes?"
> "What, they're all Jewish, superheroes. Superman, you don't think he's Jewish? Coming over from the old country, changing his name like that. Clark Kent, only a Jew would pick a name like that for himself."

The politically charged remains personal. It is not a novel about homosexuality or Jews —it is a novel about a couple of Jewish guys that live in New York.

And as if to prove that ambition should not be manifest in page after page of noise, Don DeLillo has reissued the wonderful first section of his *Underworld*[6] for the fiftieth anniversary of the "Shot Heard Round the World." It takes place at the 1951 pennant game, Giants versus Dodgers. The Giants had come from behind to get there, and they won. "Bobby Thomson hit a line drive into the lower deck of the left field stands and the place is going crazy." "The Giants win the pennant. [Repeat endlessly!]"

In ninety pages DeLillo works through his whole mosaic. The book succeeds at a level unsurpassed by anything else DeLillo has ever written. It is American portraiture at its finest and to get it without the accompanying zillion pages of garbage-obsessed ramble is a real gift. Standing this next to the ineffectual slide show that is *John Henry Days* constitutes a real case for restraint.

We have been continually told this fall that these are important books: widely reviewed, heavily praised, on the cover of *The New York Times Book Review*, headed for prizes, even Oprah knows it. Beckett once wrote, albeit with typical despondency, that "every word is like an unnecessary stain on the beauty of silence and nothingness." Would that writers had this taped to the wall above their desks.

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6 *Pafko at the Wall*, by Don DeLillo; Scribner, 96 pages, $16.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

Special art issue in December: articles
by Hilton Kramer, Roger Kimball, Karen Wilkin, E. V. Thaw, Kermit Champa, Michael J. Lewis, Mario Naves & Daniel Kunitz
The survival of culture: a series
by Keith Windschuttle, David Pryce-Jones, Robert Bork, Mark Steyn & others
The asymmetrical George Moore *by Richard Tillinghast*
Simone Weil: a saint for our time? *by Jillian Becker*
Willmoore Kendall: a memoir *by Jeffrey Hart*
Laurence Sterne *by Brooke Allen*
W. G. Sebald *by Tess Lewis*

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Books

Democracy & pugnacity

by Marc M. Arkin

More than two hundred years ago, when the republic was young and republicanism itself was still an untried experiment, American political culture had yet to come to grips with the idea of a loyal opposition. Dissent was confused with conspiracy; disagreement with disloyalty; parties with subversion. Throughout the 1790s, as the republic groped its way toward an uncertain future, political battles had an almost breathtaking ferocity, an intensity grounded on a complete distrust of the motives and integrity of opponents. Otherwise reasonable men believed conservatives were plotting a return to monarchy, republicans to deliver the country to France. Today, with more than two centuries of representative government behind us, it is hard to recapture the fears and passions that led Virginians to toast "A speedy Death to General Washington" or the bitterness that led John Adams to maintain his grudge against Alexander Hamilton's "infamous calumnies," even if, as Adams wrote, "the author of them with a pistol bullet in his spinal marrow, died a penitent."

Although American politics have never been a pastime for the faint of heart, their sheer physical and rhetorical violence in the 1790s is overwhelming. There were, of course, episodes of resistance within the several states to the authority of the central government, most notably in Pennsylvania, which, while hosting the nation's capital (1790–1800), also gave rise to the Whiskey Rebellion (1794) and the revolt of John Fries (1799). But, faced with the unrest generated by the French Revolution and the Quasi-War with France, the governing Federalists themselves devised the Alien and Sedition Acts and the Provisional Army, both aimed largely at ridding themselves of a domestic fifth column. And, in response, armed bands of Jeffersonian militia openly drilled from Baltimore to Boston, preparing to withstand the Federalist army and the anticipated coup d'état by a newly promoted General Hamilton. During the critical days of 1798 and 1799, political mobs roamed the streets of Philadelphia, inspiring President John Adams secretly to smuggle arms into his home through the back streets.

It was also during the 1790s that the rigidly choreographed violence of the political duel became an accepted risk of American public life. Condemned by clergymen, outlawed by legislatures, duels were, nevertheless, endemic. The infamous 1804 encounter between Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr was not the aberration it seems today, but part of a widespread phenomenon. By one account, Hamilton himself was directly involved in no fewer than *ten* politically inspired affairs of honor before his fatal encounter with Burr; all the others ended short of gunfire. For example, in 1797, Hamilton and future president James Monroe came within a hair's breadth of a duel over leaked documents—a rapidly escalating verbal confrontation beginning

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with Hamilton calling Monroe a liar, Monroe declaring Hamilton a "scoundrel," Hamilton announcing that he would meet Monroe "like a Gentleman," and Monroe demanding Hamilton get his pistols—until horrified seconds managed to smooth things over. Hamilton himself served as second in two duels. And, in 1801, Hamilton's nineteen-year-old son Philip was killed in a duel with New York lawyer George Eacker—an encounter that took place on the same Weehawken site and with the very same brace of pistols that claimed Hamilton's life three years later. Indeed, in 1799, in yet another duel, Hamilton's brother-in-law, John Barker Church, shot a button off Aaron Burr's coat with one of those well-used pistols.

While Hamilton, as leader of a political faction, may have attracted more than his share of combat, he was not that unusual among the public figures of the day. John Adams's pugnacious son-in-law, William Smith, surveyor of customs for the port of New York, was notorious for issuing challenges. In 1802, New York Mayor DeWitt Clinton exchanged harmless fire five times with Burr ally John Swartout before calling it a day. Not all were so lucky. In 1798, Brockholst Livingston, a future judge of the New York Court of Appeals, killed the Federalist James Jones in a duel provoked when Jones tweaked Livingston's nose over a skit satirizing the Federalists. After an aborted encounter with rival newspaperman James Cheetham, William Coleman, the editor of *The New York Post*, killed the city's harbormaster in a related duel; Coleman himself ended his days paralyzed from the waist down as the result of a caning inflicted during another honor dispute.

The violence even spilled onto the floor of Congress. In one notorious 1798 incident, Vermont Representative Matthew Lyon spat in the face of Connecticut's Roger Griswold when Griswold called him to account for some insulting comments overheard in a private conversation. After the House refused to expel "Spitting Matt," Griswold took matters into his own hands, bludgeoning Lyon with a hickory walking stick in the House chamber. Extricating himself from his chair, Lyon grabbed a set of fireplace tongs from behind the Speaker's desk and the two continued to have at one another—almost literally, hammer and tongs—while Speaker Jonathan Dayton ignored shouts from members to call the House to order, intending to afford Griswold full opportunity to clear his name. Onlookers finally pried the pair apart. James Madison's laconic reaction was that Griswold had forfeited his right to satisfaction as a man of honor by seeking recourse from the House rather than caning Lyon in the first place.

What are we to make of all this? How are we to understand the pervasive violence of the 1790s and, in particular, the hair-trigger tempers displayed by the nation's leaders at every level of government? As Americans, we are accustomed to think of the founders as a generation of demi-gods, flawed perhaps, but nevertheless wiser, better, more statesmanlike than any group in public life since. And here they are, those larger-than-life figures, the fathers of our country, ready to take each other out at ten paces at the drop of a hat. It is as if a gulf has opened up between us, turning people we thought we knew well into strangers from another world.

In her excellent and thought-provoking new study, Joanne Freeman argues that this bewildering culture of honor filled a critical—even a constructive—role in the public life of the early republic.[1] Indeed, she contends that without exploring the importance of honor and its attendant rituals we cannot fully understand the conduct of the first generation of American politicians as they attempted to forge a national government. Notoriously, the American republic was founded without principles, without parties, and, most important, without precedent. Most citizens of the new country

1 *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic*, by Joanne B. Freeman; Yale University Press, 384 pages, $29.95.

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had never ventured beyond their home communities. In a world largely reliant on personal relationships, as Freeman points out, members of the first congresses rarely knew one another and were woefully unaccustomed to thinking in national terms, much less to acting on a national stage.

What is more, when they did meet one another, they didn't like each other very much. Northerners complained about "southern blusterers" and southerners proclaimed themselves ready "to submit to all the hazards of war & risk the loss of every thing dear . . . in life, than to live under the rule of a fixed insolent northern majority." The north-south antipathy may be expected; what is startling is what one Pennsylvania representative said about the delegation from a fellow middle Atlantic state: "The New Yorkers and I are on an equal footing. Mutual civility without a grain of good liking between us."

In this radically new political world—before the formation of political parties—Freeman contends, it was all but impossible for fellow legislators to predict a colleague's views or loyalties on any issue. Her thesis, persuasively argued, is that personal character and reputation filled the public void, reinforced by extra-institutional channels such as gossip networks, print warfare, and, as a last resort, dueling. The code of honor provided the participants in this early national free-for-all with a common set of rules; as Lord Chesterfield summed it up pithily, "There are but two alternatives for a gentleman; extreme politeness or the sword."

This book is clearly scholarship of a very high order, sensitively deploying the latest ethnographic methodology and displaying a masterful command of a wide range of primary sources, from diaries and correspondence to broadsides and newspapers. At the same time, Freeman reaches out to a general audience with an admirable writing style and telling use of anecdotes. Each of the book's chapters (three of which have appeared as independent essays in scholarly journals) revolves around a single incident or documentary source, some all but unknown outside of the scholarly community and others uncovered by the author in the course of her archival work. Each vignette is a window into the unwritten rules and informal institutions that governed politics before the development of the party system displaced them.

Thus, the first chapter concentrates on the diary of Pennsylvania Senator William Maclay as he painfully negotiated his way through the first congress, learning the political value of dinner parties while seeing threats to his austere version of republicanism everywhere he went. The second chapter focuses on the etiquette and function of political gossip using Thomas Jefferson's "Anas" (Tabletalk), an anthology carefully selected by Jefferson from the notes he kept of all his private conversations. It was found among his papers and published posthumously, to the great consternation of all who appeared in its anecdotes. Gentlemen, of course, did no such thing; nothing in this book will serve to enhance the already much diminished reputation of our third president. Later chapters cover the hierarchy of the paper media in political disputes—exemplified by the bitter print dispute between Alexander Hamilton and John Adams—and present the Burr-Hamilton duel as an honor dispute that, given the character and history of both men, had a tragic inevitability.

The epilogue, really an extra chapter, chronicles the struggle to construct a history of the founding, in which the partisans of the 1790s battled to secure their reputations for posterity. It is largely told through the eyes of an obscure Federalist politician, Senator (and later Governor) William Plumer of New Hampshire. Although Plumer's efforts were outstanding for their sheer obsessiveness, virtually every major participant in early national politics took steps to secure his place in the historical record—even the notoriously enigmatic Aaron Burr. Burr's little-remembered memoir, actually written by his political lieutenant Matthew Livingston Davis, obviously did not achieve its

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goal of restoring Burr's reputation; nevertheless, if Freeman's reading is any indication, Burr's version of the events of 1800 has a ring of truth lacking in the received Jeffersonion account.

The weakest element of the book is its account of the presidential election of 1800 as "An Honor Dispute of Grand Proportions." Perhaps after almost two hundred pages of honor disputes, I was simply surfeited with honor and longed for a discussion of, say, the "three-fifths clause," without which Adams would have won the election handily. But, more fundamentally, the account casts doubt on Freeman's underlying claim that strong party structure did not develop until after the turn of the century. Put succinctly, the 1800 election yielded a tie in the electoral college between Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr, ostensibly the Republican presidential and vice-presidential candidates. As a result, the election was thrown into the House of Representatives, where, on the thirty-sixth ballot, Federalist Representative James Bayard—the sole member of the Delaware delegation and therefore the controlling vote—broke the tie, making Jefferson president and Burr vice president.

The scandal, if there was one, was that there was much behind-the-scenes politicking, some of it unseemly by the standards of the day. Federalists flirted with shifting their votes to Burr, although it seems that many were deterred by Alexander Hamilton's statement that even Jefferson—who had some pretense to character—would make a better president than Burr, "the American Catiline." Others, including Bayard, attempted to secure formal concessions from Jefferson; they believed themselves successful, though Jefferson's promises were made on an informal basis.

The conventional interpretation of these events is that the Republicans had instilled sufficient party discipline in their followers to cause and hold the tie. Freeman argues to the contrary, that under stress there was little glue other than personal relationships and regional loyalties to cement Jeffersonian ranks. Yet Freeman admits that for thirty-six ballots no Republican dared shift a vote, a cohesion that suggests party was a fairly good indicator of voting behavior by 1800 and a claim that robs reputation of much of its significance in Freeman's scheme. Her case is stronger when she suggests that honor required neither the candidates nor house members to engage in electoral horse trading—although, I believe, by 1800 the old term of "standing for office" was being replaced by the more modern "running for office," a change with obvious political implications.

Indeed, as an historian I cannot help a raised eyebrow about some of the book's wider claims. Although Freeman's cultural observations are altogether compelling, it seems to me that she does not truly grapple with the peculiar violence of political culture in the 1790s nor does she persuasively account for the importance of reputation by the time party allegiances were relatively clear, say, after 1800. What is more, the persistence of stylized violence, however debased, in American politics—the best-known example being the 1856 caning of Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner on the floor of the senate by South Carolina's Preston Brooks—seems to undercut Freeman's intial thesis that reputation had what linguists call a signifier function in the early republic. Instead, it seems to me, she is far nearer the mark in her discussion of the founding generation's effort to seize control of the history of the early republic. It may be old-fashioned to say it, but sometimes things are exactly what they seem. The founders universally understood reputation and honor to be ends in themselves; they acted and wrote not only for the moment but also for posterity, indeed, for us. It is this "decent regard for the opinions of mankind" that lifted them above the minor European nobility from whom they inherited the *code duello* and spurred them to the greatness they desired, creating in the process the longest-lived republic in the history of the world. But these are cavils regarding a book that is never less than en-

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joyable and informative and, even when it triggers skepticism, always thought-provoking.

Elusive stances

Stanley Fish How Milton Works. Harvard University Press, 616 pages, $35

reviewed by Paul Dean

In Book VII of *Paradise Lost* Milton wrote:

> Forthwith the Sounds and Seas, each Creek and Bay
> With Fry innumerable swarm, and Shoals
> Of Fish that with their Fins and shining Scales
> Glide under the green Wave, in Schools that oft
> Bank the mid Sea . . .

Our particular Fish and his school have been a promontory in the sea of Milton criticism since the publication of *Surprised by Sin* in 1967. Writing on literature, as on jurisprudence, Stanley Fish has attacked certain traits of liberalism, among them the assumption that we can transcend the immediate and historically contingent in order to scrutinize or evaluate the ethical bases of our actions. That being the case, it is puzzling that his new book—which is, in fact, largely a compilation of previously published articles, inadequately copyedited to eliminate repetition or streamline the argument—is so lacking in any sense of historical or biographical context. "In my story," he claims, "agents are always and already situated"; since our wish to know, or act, other than we do, is doomed to fail, morality is a matter not of decision-making but of predetermination. Fish is, of course, free (or perhaps he would say he isn't) to believe this depressing doctrine if he must, but the argument of his book is that Milton believed it too, and here there is room for disagreement.

Fish's account of Milton's mental world is initially set out with force and clarity. It is uncompromisingly absolutist. If God is God, all resistance to his will is useless, all opposition to him sin, all efforts to win his favor futile. Happiness lies only in faith, obedience, and submission. Hence inaction, not action, is the path to virtue, for action would imply the possibility that one's principles could change, that there were alternatives to the divine plan: action, like freedom and choice, is rejected by the elect. The Lady in *Comus*, for instance, "is not good because she does x; rather, x is good because *she* does it," while Satan in *Paradise Lost* is a typical liberal, enthroning his own will and choice as supreme and believing that ethical questions are open to rational debate. Far from being elusive and relative, truth is a plain and simple matter; ambiguity, whether conceptual or verbal, is a snare of the Devil.

One might well ask, if human reason is depraved and all argument a waste of time, why Milton felt he had to "justify the ways of God to men" by writing a twelve-book epic. If metaphor is deceit, why write poetry? If all worldly knowledge is vain, what becomes of Milton's pamphlet *Of Education*, with its insistence on the need to master the classical languages, literatures, and philosophical systems? If obedience to authority is preferable to the exercise of private judgment, where does that leave *Areopagitica*, or *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, or Milton's republicanism? Above all, if Christian orthodoxy is unchanging and unchangeable, what are we to make of the denial of the doctrine of the Trinity in *On Christian Doctrine*—a work of disputed authorship that Fish, nonetheless, accepts as Milton's? In chapters 3 and 4 of that work, furthermore, Calvinist determinism is rejected in favor of a broadly Arminian position that advocates human freewill. For Fish, Milton's theology is simply Calvinist throughout; one has to go to a biography, such as Barbara K. Lewalski's *Life of John Milton* (2001), to learn that Milton's thought developed away from Calvin. Since Fish has already decided that "development" of any kind is wicked, he can't allow

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for this, or for the chronology of Milton's works that he also ignores. Yet we find him welcoming the Fall on account of its potential for development; mortality "generates hope and gives time and history a reason for unfolding." The inconsistency and illogicality are glaring, but they don't seem to bother Fish.

Of course, understanding Milton's views on anything is a complex and delicate matter, and Fish is right to protest against the distortion of *Areopagitica* into a plea for total freedom of expression (Milton didn't advocate the total abolition of censorship; he would have suppressed Catholic works). But it is surely beyond dispute that Milton believed in the power of argument; he never shook off his early education in humanist rhetoric. Granted, he also believed that there were good and bad arguments, expecting us to recognize the difference between the debates in Pandemonium and in Heaven, for instance. In one of the best sections of the book, the discussion of *Samson Agonistes*, Fish can recognize that attempts to explain Samson's predicament are all frustrated, that the Chorus, for example, deploys arguments from Augustine, Aquinas, or Boethius at various times, but he does not conclude in this case that the activity is either futile or sinful. Rather, as he says, it "articulates the misgivings we ourselves have felt" about the contradictoriness of the world and the inscrutability of the divine purpose. Many readers of Milton have felt that he was more perplexed about God than he sometimes pretended to be; Fish writes at his best when he is sympathetic to this view. Late in the book he acknowledges the ambiguity in Milton's attitude to his own work—"he wants at once to leave his mark and to have it erased"—and admits that Milton's belief in individual conscience "precludes him from laying down the law even though he preaches the necessity of conforming to it." Unfortunately, Fish himself lays down the law while conforming to it only sporadically.

Fish has been a particularly successful close reader, and at moments in *How Milton Works* he shows a vigorous power of analysis and commentary. For example, his absorbing reading of the encounter between Comus and the Lady uncovers debts to Renaissance interpretations of Ovid's Echo and Narcissus story and to the meeting of Aeneas and Venus in Book I of the *Aeneid*. He is also very attentive to nuances of syntax and grammar, as when he notes the choric effects achieved by the "nonsubordinating, appositional mode" of "At a Solemn Music." In too many places, however, Fish is content with paraphrase or straightforward unexamined quotation, giving ammunition to those who argue that Milton's verse doesn't offer enough richness of texture to bear close scrutiny, and assuming, in an almost neo-Augustan way, the separability of thought from expression. Sometimes he can be surprisingly gushing, as on the close of "Lycidas": "One (no longer *a* one) hears the music of one's own being, hears the inner music, *is* the inner music." He happily produces self-contradictory local readings: "Milton's Eden is not static, is not securely what it is, and [. . .] in its *in*security lies its glory," although he has earlier presented the static as the only good. He is generally better on the poetry than on the prose, although he omits much of both; among other gaps there is nothing on the *Animadversions*, *Of Reformation*, the *Elegies* or, astonishingly, the sonnets.

How Milton Works is offered as a summa of Fish's life's work, and no one can deny that he knows his author deeply and admires him sincerely. The main flaws in the book are its willful illogicality, its indifference to context, and its self-indulgent tone. Fish knows he is perceived as a major critic, and is rather too comfortable with that. We are implicitly invited to take his elusive multiplicity of stances as evidence of profound engagement. To do so would be to accept that very approach to the world—tentative, provisional, and contingent—that he asks us to reject. Had he been more self-critical about his own development, he might have given us more insights into Milton's.

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A folklorish giant

Peter Raby
Alfred Russel Wallace: A Life.
Princeton University Press,
340 pages, $29.95

reviewed by Guy Davenport

Alfred Russel Wallace, heroic naturalist, anthropologist, and evolutionary theorist, began his ninety years in a Welsh cottage as so unpromising a new-born that the family performed a make-do "half-baptism" until the vicar could do a proper one at Llanbadoc five weeks later, on 16 February 1823. He went through his life being the short half of great enterprises. He and Darwin discovered the mechanics of evolution neck-and-neck. He and Henry Walter Bates explored the Amazon together, but Bates's *Naturalist on the River Amazons* remains the classic account. In the great foment of Victorian geology, etymology, and botany he was—until his last decade—looked down on as the lower-class boy from the Welsh hills who didn't quite fit in with the gentlemen at the Royal Society.

Wallace was also accident prone. All in one day in the Brazilian jungle he infuriated a swarm of bees, lost his glasses, and mistook a live alligator for a dead one. The ship bringing him and his specimens to England, a veritable natural history museum in hundreds of crates and cages, caught fire and sank. The crew escaped in an open long boat. Wallace swore an oath that he would never set foot on a ship again. Almost immediately, however, he set out for the Malay Straits where from 1854 to 1862 he endured the bone-wracking adventures recounted in his most readable book, *The Malay Archipelago: The Land of the Orang-utan and the Bird of Paradise: A Narrative of Travel with Studies of Man and Nature* (1869).

Dover, the most intelligent and educated of American publishers, keeps this book in print. I hope they will add Wallace's *Island Life* and his epochal *The Geographical Distribution of Animals, with a Study of the Rela-*

Statement of ownership, management & circulation

TITLE OF PUBLICATION: The New Criterion.
PUBLICATION NO.: 705-590.
DATE OF FILING: October 10, 2000.
FREQUENCY OF ISSUE: Monthly except July and August.
NO. OF ISSUES PUBLISHED ANNUALLY: 10.
ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION PRICE: $42.
COMPLETE MAILING ADDRESS OF KNOWN OFFICE OF PUBLICATION: 850 Seventh Avenue, Suite 400, New York, NY 10019-5230 Manhattan County
COMPLETE MAILING ADDRESS OF THE HEADQUARTERS OF GENERAL BUSINESS OFFICES OF THE PUBLISHER: Same.
FULL NAMES & COMPLETE MAILING ADDRESS OF THE PUBLISHER, EDITOR & MANAGING EDITOR: *Publisher*: Hilton Kramer, 850 Seventh Avenue, Suite 400, New York, NY 10019-5230; *Editor*: Hilton Kramer, 850 Seventh Avenue, Suite 400, New York, NY 10019-5230; *Managing Editor*: Roger Kimball, 850 Seventh Avenue, Suite 400, New York, NY 10019-5230.
OWNER: Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 850 Seventh Avenue, Suite 400, New York, NY 10019-5230 (a nonprofit public foundation as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public).
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Total no. copies printed: Avg. no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 10,434; Actual no. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 10,162.
Paid and/or requested circulation: (1) Paid/Requested Outside-County Mail Subscriptions Stated on Form 3541: Avg. no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 4,425; Actual no. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 4,364. (2) Paid In-County Subscriptions: Avg. no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 708; Actual no. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 698. (3) Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, counter Sales, and Other Non-USPS Paid Distribution: Avg. no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 515; Actual no. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 1,250. (4) Other classes mailed through the USPS: Avg. no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 0; Actual no. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 0.
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Copies not distributed: Avg. no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 1,056; Actual no. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 411.
TOTAL: Avg. no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 10,434; percent paid and/or requested circulation: 60%. Actual no. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 10,162; percent paid and/or requested circulation: 64%.
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tions of Living and Extinct Faunas as Elucidating the Past Changes of the Earth's Surface (1876); they serve as a kind of Brahm's First to the Beethoven's Ninth of Darwin's *Origin* and *Descent*. "Wallace's Line" still snakes across maps of Southeast Asia in zoology texts: *these* animals (e.g., tigers) above it; *these* (e.g., kangaroos) below it.

Except for the young Wallace's reading every book he could lay hand on, he had only a spotty primary education. His older brother John taught him surveying, an activity that was an education in itself. Moreover it made him curious about geology and botany. At age fourteen he was probably more knowledgeable than a Harvard or Yale senior of the moment. It was books of travel (von Humboldt, Bonpland) that made an explorer of him. A shilling pamphlet published by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge led him to John Claudius Loudon's *Encyclopedia of Plants* and set him on his way to being one of the world's greatest botanists. Genius invents itself. Mungo Park educated himself as a child while pushing the arm of a grist mill, holding a book open with his thumbs, around and around. Hugh Miller, disgusted by his third-grade teacher, took his cap from its peg, and walked out, never to return.

Wallace published twenty-two "major works" and countless scientific, political, and batty articles (he became a spiritualist during the latter half of his life, an eager customer of mediums, table-floaters, and alphabetic rappers). In 1866 he married the twenty-two-year-old daughter of the pharmacist William Mitten. In his autobiography, he says that she was eighteen (Victorian maidens fibbed). The marriage was a happy one of Alpine botanizing, Ice Age geology, children, socialist idealism, and building house after house, each planned as the perfect home (paradigmatic orchards, gardens, beautiful rooms) and each abandoned every few years for a better one.

Wallace became a Shavian stereotype, with a Shavian bouquet of causes: anti-vaccination, anti-exotic-bird-feathers in women's hats, anti-capitalism and anti-colonialism. He travelled (crossing the United States by stagecoach and train), theorized ("Language is all onomatopoetics"), and embarrassed Darwin by perceiving a guiding intelligence in nature (i.e., God). The more crotchety he became, the more the scientific community rained honors on his head, from medals (Linnaean Society, Royal Society) to the Order of Merit (for which he ducked the investiture at Buckingham Palace, refusing to don court dress—the king's equerry brought it to him). He lectured on land reform, government ownership of railways, workers' rights, moral progress through democracy. The English adore and honor eighty-year-old eccentrics, the more crackpot the better.

Despite his consistent refusal to be the co-discoverer of the theory of Natural Selection, the Linnaean Society has always accorded him that honor (and in 1998 hung a full-length portrait of him beside one of Darwin). Last year (15 April 2000) Wallace's grave at Bournemouth became a lease *in perpetuum* to the Linnaean Society, and Wallace's great-great-grandson set a spray of flowers on it.

There have been many previous biographers of Wallace, and among historians of science there is the ongoing debate as to whether evolution is Wallace's or Darwin's discovery. This amounts to something of a parlor game. It is well known that Darwin was not planning to rush into print with his theory when, out of the blue, came a letter from Wallace succinctly outlining the theory. Darwin was appalled. He asked his colleagues for guidance and advice. The ethical thing to do, everyone agreed, was to present the theory to the Linnaean Society (on 1 July 1858) as by the two. Neither was present: Darwin was at the funeral of an infant son; Wallace was in Malaysia.

In an age of white-coated, grant-seeking scientists secure in foundations and universities, their Victorian forebears look like folklorish giants. Peter Raby's life of Wallace catches the charm, daring, and high seriousness or the age, while scrupulously measuring Wallace's distinction as a man and a scientist.

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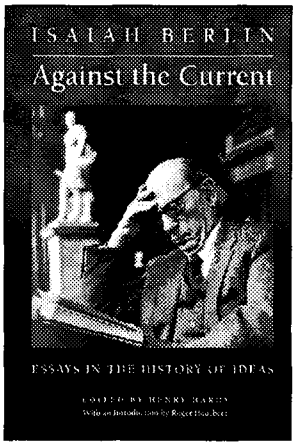

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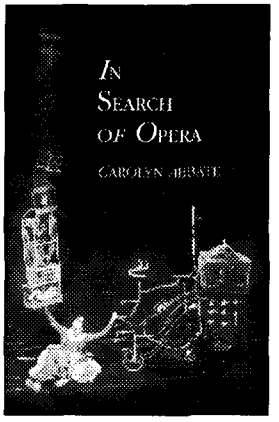

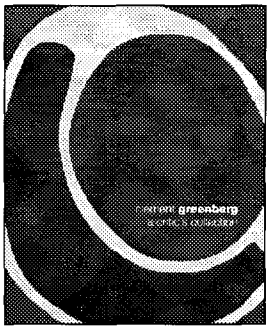

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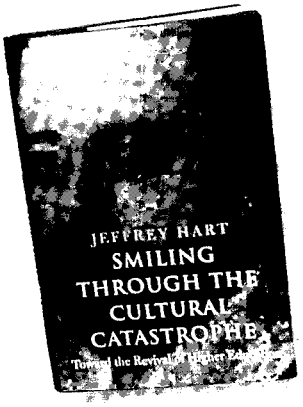

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